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and Other Poems

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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

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The Riverside Literature Series

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL
AND OTHER POEMS

BY

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH, NOTES, PORTRAITS AND OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

AND WITH AIDS TO THE STUDY OF
THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

BY

H. A. DAVIDSON

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A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

I

ELMWOOD

About half a mile from the Craigie House in Cambridge, Mass., on the road leading to the old town of Watertown, is Elmwood, a spacious square house set amongst lilac and syringa bushes, and overtopped by elms. Pleasant fields are on either side, and from the windows one may look out on the Charles River winding its way among the marshes. The house itself is one of a group which before the war for independence belonged to Boston merchants and officers of the crown who refused to take the side of the revolutionary party. Tory Row was the name given to the broad winding road on which the houses stood. Great farms and gardens were attached to them, and some sign of their roomy ease still remains. The estates fell into the hands of various persons after the war, and in process of time Longfellow came to occupy Craigie House. Elmwood at that time was the property of the Reverend Charles Lowell, minister of the West Church in Boston; and when Longfellow thus became his neighbor, James Russell Lowell was a Junior in Harvard College. He was born at Elmwood February 22, 1819. Any one who will read *An Indian-Summer Reverie* will discover how affectionately Lowell dwelt on the scenes of nature and life amidst which he grew up. Indeed, it would be a pleasant task to draw from the full storehouse of his poetry the golden phrases with which he characterizes the trees, meadows, brooks, flowers, birds,

and human companions that were so near to him in his youth and so vivid in his recollection. In his prose works also, especially *My Garden Acquaintance* and *A Good Word for Winter*, Lowell has given glimpses of the outdoor life in the midst of which he grew up; and in *Cambridge Thirty Years Ago*, many reminiscences of his early life.

II

EDUCATION

Lowell's acquaintance with books and his schooling began early. He learned his letters at a dame school. Mr. William Wells, an Englishman, opened a classical school in one of the spacious Tory Row houses near Elmwood, and, bringing with him English public school thoroughness and severity, gave the boy a drilling in Latin, which he must have made almost a native speech, to judge by the ease with which he handled it afterward in mock heroics. Of course he went to Harvard College. He lived at his father's house, more than a mile away from the college yard; but this could have been no great privation to him, for he had the freedom of his friends' rooms, and he loved the open air.

Lowell was but fifteen years old when he entered college in the class which graduated in 1838. He was a reader, as so many of his fellows were, and the letters which he wrote shortly after leaving college show how intent he had been on making acquaintance with the best things in literature. He began also to scribble verse, and he wrote both poems and essays for college magazines. His class chose him their poet for Class Day, and he wrote his poem; but he was careless about conforming to college regulations respecting attendance at morning prayers, and for this was suspended from college the last term of his last year, and not allowed to come back to read his poem. He was sent to Concord for his rustication, and so passed a few weeks of his youth amongst scenes dear to every lover of American letters.

ELMWOOD, CAMBRIDGE

III

FIRST VENTURE

After his graduation he set about the study of law, and for a short time was even a clerk in a counting-room; but his bent was strongly toward literature. There was at that time no magazine of commanding importance in America, and young men were given to starting magazines with enthusiasm and very little other capital. Such a one was the *Boston Miscellany*, launched by Nathan Hale, Lowell's college friend, and for this Lowell wrote gayly. It lived a year, and shortly after Lowell himself, with Robert Carter, essayed *The Pioneer* in 1843. It lived just three months; but in that time printed contributions by Lowell, Hawthorne, Whittier, Story, Poe, and Dr. Parsons, — a group which it would be hard to match in any of the little magazines that hop across the world's path to-day. Lowell had already collected, in 1841, the poems which he had written and sometimes contributed to periodicals into a volume entitled *A Year's Life;* but he retained very little of the contents in later editions of his poems. The book has a special interest, however, from its dedication, in veiled phrase, to Maria White. He became engaged to this lady in the fall of 1840, and the next twelve years of his life were profoundly affected by her influence. Herself a poet of delicate power, she brought into his life an intelligent sympathy with his work; it was, however, her strong moral enthusiasm, her lofty conception of purity and justice, which kindled his spirit and gave force and direction to a character which was ready to respond, and yet might otherwise have delayed active expression. They were not married until 1844; but they were not far apart in their homes, and during these years Lowell was making those early ventures in literature, and first raids upon political and moral evil, which foretold the direction of his later work, and gave some hint of its abundance.

About the time of his marriage, he published two books which by their character show pretty well the divided interest of his life. His bent from the beginning was more decidedly literary than that of any contemporary American poet. That is to say, the history and art of literature divided his interest with the production of literature, and he carried the unusual gift of a rare critical power, joined to hearty spontaneous creation. It may indeed be guessed that the keenness of judgment and incisiveness of wit which characterize his examination of literature sometimes interfered with his poetic power, and made him liable to question his art when he would rather have expressed it unchecked. One of the two books was a volume of poems; the other was a prose work, *Conversations on Some of the Old Poets.* He did not keep this book alive; but it is interesting as marking the enthusiasm of a young scholar treading a way then almost wholly neglected in America, and intimating a line of thought and study in which he afterward made most noteworthy venture. Another series of poems followed in 1848, and in the same year *The Vision of Sir Launfal.* Perhaps it was in reaction from the marked sentiment of his poetry that he issued now a *jeu d'esprit, A Fable for Critics,* in which he hit off, with a rough and ready wit, the characteristics of the writers of the day, not forgetting himself in these lines: —

"There is Lowell, who 's striving Parnassus to climb
With a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme;
He might get on alone, spite of brambles and boulders,
But he can't with that bundle he has on his shoulders;
The top of the hill he will ne'er come nigh reaching
Till he learns the distinction 'twixt singing and preaching;
His lyre has some chords that would ring pretty well,
But he 'd rather by half make a drum of the shell,
And rattle away till he 's old as Methusalem,
At the head of a march to the last new Jerusalem."

This, of course, is but a half-serious portrait of himself, and it touches but a single feature; others can say better that Lowell's ardent nature showed itself in the series of

satirical poems which made him famous, *The Biglow Papers*, written in a spirit of indignation and fine scorn, when the Mexican War was causing many Americans to blush with shame at the use of the country by a class for its own ignoble ends. Lowell and his wife, who brought a fervid anti-slavery temper as part of her marriage portion, were both contributors to the *Liberty Bell;* and Lowell was a frequent contributor to the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, and was, indeed, for a while a corresponding editor. In June, 1846, there appeared one day in the *Boston Courier* a letter from Mr. Ezekiel Biglow of Jaalam to the editor, Hon. Joseph T. Buckingham, inclosing a poem of his son, Mr. Hosea Biglow. It was no new thing to seek to arrest the public attention with the vernacular applied to public affairs. Major Jack Downing and Sam Slick had been notable examples, and they had many imitators; but the reader who laughed over the racy narrative of the unlettered Ezekiel, and then took up Hosea's poem and caught the gust of Yankee wrath and humor blown fresh in his face, knew that he was in at the appearance of something new in American literature. The force which Lowell displayed in these satires made his book at once a powerful ally of an anti-slavery sentiment which heretofore had been ridiculed.

IV

VERSE AND PROSE

A year in Europe, 1851–1852, with his wife, whose health was then precarious, stimulated his scholarly interests, and gave substance to his study of Dante and Italian literature. In October, 1853, his wife died; she had borne him four children: the first-born, Blanche, died in infancy, as did another daughter, Rose; the third child, Walter, also died young; the fourth, a daughter, Mrs. Burnett, survived her parents. In 1855 he was chosen successor to Longfellow as Smith Professor of the French and Spanish Languages

and Literature, and Professor of Belles Lettres in Harvard College. He spent two years in Europe in further preparation for the duties of his office, and in 1857 was again established in Cambridge, and installed in his academic chair. He married, also, at this time Miss Frances Dunlap, of Portland, Maine.

Lowell was now in his thirty-ninth year. As a scholar, in his professional work, he had acquired a versatile knowledge of the Romance languages, and was an adept in old French and Provençal poetry; he had given a course of twelve lectures on English poetry before the Lowell Institute in Boston, which had made a strong impression on the community, and his work on the series of *British Poets* in connection with Professor Child, especially his biographical sketch of Keats, had been recognized as of a high order. In poetry he had published the volumes already mentioned. In general literature he had printed in magazines the papers which he afterward collected into his volume, *Fireside Travels*. Not long after he entered on his college duties, *The Atlantic Monthly* was started, and the editorship given to him. He held the office for a year or two only; but he continued to write for the magazine, and in 1862 he was associated with Mr. Charles Eliot Norton in the conduct of *The North American Review*, and continued in this charge for ten years. Much of his prose was contributed to this periodical. Any one reading the titles of the papers which comprise the volumes of his prose writings will readily see how much literature, and especially poetic literature, occupied his attention. Shakespeare, Dryden, Lessing, Rousseau, Dante, Spenser, Wordsworth, Milton, Keats, Carlyle, Percival, Thoreau, Swinburne, Chaucer, Emerson, Pope, Gray, — these are the principal subjects of his prose, and the range of topics indicates the catholicity of his taste.

In these papers, when studying poetry, he was very much alive to the personality of the poets, and it was his strong interest in humanity which led Lowell, when he was most diligent in the pursuit of literature, to apply himself also to

history and politics. Several of his essays bear witness to this, such as *Witchcraft*, *New England Two Centuries Ago*, *A Great Public Character* (Josiah Quincy), *Abraham Lincoln*, and his great *Political Essays*. But the most remarkable of his writings of this order was the second series of *The Biglow Papers*, published during the war for the Union. In these, with the wit and fun of the earlier series, there was mingled a deeper strain of feeling and a larger tone of patriotism. The limitations of his style in these satires forbade the fullest expression of his thought and emotion; but afterward in a succession of poems, occasioned by the honors paid to student soldiers in Cambridge, the death of Agassiz, and the celebration of national anniversaries during the years 1875 and 1876, he sang in loftier, more ardent strains. The most famous of these poems was his noble *Commemoration Ode*.

V

PUBLIC LIFE

It was at the close of this period, when he had done incalculable service to the Republic, that Lowell was called on to represent the country, first in Madrid, where he was sent in 1877, and then in London, to which he was transferred in 1880. Eight years were thus spent by him in the foreign service of his country. He had a good knowledge of the Spanish language and literature when he went to Spain; but he at once took pains to make his knowledge fuller and his accent more perfect, so that he could have intimate relations with the best Spaniards of the time. In England he was at once a most welcome guest, and was in great demand as a public speaker. No one can read his dispatches from Madrid and London without being struck by his sagacity, his readiness in emergencies, his interest in and quick perception of the political situation in the country where he was resident, and his unerring knowledge as a man of the

world. Above all, he was through and through an American, true to the principles which underlie American institutions. His address on *Democracy*, which he delivered in England, is one of the great statements of human liberty. A few years later, after his return to America, he gave another address to his own countrymen on *The Place of the Independent in Politics*. It was a noble defence of his own position, not without a trace of discouragement at the apparently sluggish movement in American self-government of recent years, but with that faith in the substance of his countrymen which gave him the right to use words of honest warning.

The public life of Mr. Lowell made him more of a figure before the world. He received honors from societies and universities; he was decorated by the highest honors which Harvard could pay officially; and Oxford and Cambridge, St. Andrews and Edinburgh and Bologna gave gowns. He established warm personal relations with Englishmen, and after his release from public office he made several visits to England. There, too, was buried his second wife, who died in 1885. The closing years of his life in his own country, though marked by domestic loneliness and growing physical infirmities, were rich in the continued expression of his large personality and in the esteem of hosts of friends. He delivered the public address in commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of Harvard University; he gave a course of lectures on the Old English Dramatists before the Lowell Institute; he collected a volume of his poems; he wrote and spoke on public affairs; and, the year before his death, revised, rearranged, and carefully edited a definitive series of his writings in ten volumes. He died at Elmwood, August 12, 1891. Since his death three small volumes have been added to his collected writings, and Mr. Norton has edited *Letters of James Russell Lowell*, in two volumes. His *Life*, in two volumes, has been written by Horace E. Scudder, and also, in the *American Men of Letters Series*, by Ferris Greenslet.

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

PRELUDE TO PART FIRST

Over his keys the musing organist,
  Beginning doubtfully and far away,
First lets his fingers wander as they list,
  And builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay:
Then, as the touch of his loved instrument
  Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his theme,
First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent
  Along the wavering vista of his dream.

Not only around our infancy
Doth heaven with all its splendors lie;
Daily, with souls that cringe and plot,
We Sinais climb and know it not.

4. See Lowell's own

> "From one stage of our being to the next
> We pass unconscious o'er a slender bridge,
> The momentary work of unseen hands." . . .
> *A Glance Behind the Curtain.*

9. Read the first four stanzas of *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, and notice the similarity between Wordsworth's joyous May and Lowell's June. For the substitution of June for the May of English poets, see the opening stanzas of *Under the Willows*. The allusion in line 9 is rather to the thought of the entire stanza in the ode than to any single phrase or line.

12. **Sinais climb.** See *The Study of the Vision of Sir Launfal*, p. 92, and Lowell's *Letters*, i, 190.

Over our manhood bend the skies;
Against our fallen and traitor lives
The great winds utter prophecies;
With our faint hearts the mountain strives;
Its arms outstretched, the Druid wood
Waits with its benedicite;
And to our age's drowsy blood
Still shouts the inspiring sea.

Earth gets its price for what Earth gives us;
The beggar is taxed for a corner to die in,
The priest hath his fee who comes and shrives us,
We bargain for the graves we lie in;
At the Devil's booth are all things sold,
Each ounce of dross costs its ounce of gold;

17. **Druid wood.** Poets are fond of this figure. See "Druid-like device," *Indian-Summer Reverie;* also *Evangeline,* —

> "The murmuring pines and the hemlocks
> Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight
> Stand like Druids of eld."

The priests of the pagan religion among the Celts, the Druids, performed many rites in the woods, and the oak, especially, and the mistletoe were important in certain ceremonies. For the value attached to mistletoe growing upon an oak-tree, and for the manner of cutting it with a golden sickle, see Brand's *Popular Antiquities.* Longfellow uses this figure as a means of description, but Lowell gives to it a hidden meaning, which admirably adapts the form to the purpose of this poem. In his thought the trees of the forest have become, in this later time, the bearers of divine messages, thus taking the place of the priests who formerly found in them symbols of secret and unknown influences, potent to bless or to ban.

18. **benedicite.** See "old benedictions may recall" in *Al Fresco,* and Wordsworth's

> "The thought of our past years in me doth breed
> Perpetual benedictions."

For a cap and bells our lives we pay,
Bubbles we buy with a whole soul's tasking:
'T is heaven alone that is given away,
'T is only God may be had for the asking;
No price is set on the lavish summer;
June may be had by the poorest comer.

And what is so rare as a day in June?
Then, if ever, come perfect days;
Then Heaven tries earth if it be in tune,
And over it softly her warm ear lays;
Whether we look, or whether we listen,
We hear life murmur, or see it glisten;
Every clod feels a stir of might,
An instinct within it that reaches and towers,
And, groping blindly above it for light,
Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers;
The flush of life may well be seen
Thrilling back over hills and valleys;
The cowslip startles in meadows green,
The buttercup catches the sun in its chalice,
And there 's never a leaf nor a blade too mean

27. The reference to the court jester of the Middle Ages is obvious. For the young, the significance of the figure borrowed from the adornment of the king's fool should be interpreted by conversation and illustration.

35. Compare with Lowell's personification of spring in

"Jes' so our Spring gits everythin' in tune."
Sunthin' in the Pastoral Line.

42. Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers. Wordsworth says, in the Ode,

"The sunshine is a glorious birth,"

and he devotes the whole of the next stanza of his poem to the manifestations of this glorious birth in the abounding life of the springtime.

To be some happy creature's palace;
The little bird sits at his door in the sun,
Atilt like a blossom among the leaves,
And lets his illumined being o'errun
With the deluge of summer it receives;
His mate feels the eggs beneath her wings,
And the heart in her dumb breast flutters and sings;
He sings to the wide world, and she to her nest, —
In the nice ear of Nature which song is the best?

Now is the high-tide of the year,
And whatever of life hath ebbed away
Comes flooding back with a ripply cheer,
Into every bare inlet and creek and bay;
Now the heart is so full that a drop overfills it,
We are happy now because God wills it;
No matter how barren the past may have been,
'T is enough for us now that the leaves are green;
We sit in the warm shade and feel right well
How the sap creeps up and the blossoms swell;
We may shut our eyes, but we cannot help knowing
That skies are clear and grass is growing;
The breeze comes whispering in our ear,
That dandelions are blossoming near,
That maize has sprouted, that streams are flowing,
That the river is bluer than the sky,
That the robin is plastering his house hard by;
And if the breeze kept the good news back,
For other couriers we should not lack;
We could guess it all by yon heifer's lowing, —
And hark! how clear bold chanticleer,
Warmed with the new wine of the year,
Tells all in his lusty crowing!

Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how;
Everything is happy now,
Everything is upward striving;
'T is as easy now for the heart to be true
As for grass to be green or skies to be blue, —
'T is the natural way of living:
Who knows whither the clouds have fled?
In the unscarred heaven they leave no wake;
And the eyes forget the tears they have shed,
The heart forgets its sorrow and ache;
The soul partakes the season's youth,
And the sulphurous rifts of passion and woe
Lie deep 'neath a silence pure and smooth,
Like burnt-out craters healed with snow.
What wonder if Sir Launfal now
Remembered the keeping of his vow?

PART FIRST

I

"My golden spurs now bring to me,
And bring to me my richest mail,
For to-morrow I go over land and sea
In search of the Holy Grail;
Shall never a bed for me be spread,
Nor shall a pillow be under my head,

80. Compare Lowell's expression of the joyousness of all nature, animate and inanimate, with Wordsworth's

"And all the earth is gay;
Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity." . . .

and

"Ye blessed creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make." . . .

Till I begin my vow to keep;
Here on the rushes will I sleep,
And perchance there may come a vision true
Ere day create the world anew."
  Slowly Sir Launfal's eyes grew dim,
  Slumber fell like a cloud on him,
And into his soul the vision flew.

II

The crows flapped over by twos and threes,
In the pool drowsed the cattle up to their knees,
  The little birds sang as if it were
  The one day of summer in all the year,
And the very leaves seemed to sing on the trees:
The castle alone in the landscape lay
Like an outpost of winter, dull and gray:
'T was the proudest hall in the North Countree,
And never its gates might opened be,
Save to lord or lady of high degree;
Summer besieged it on every side,
But the churlish stone her assaults defied;
She could not scale the chilly wall,
Though around it for leagues her pavilions tall
Stretched left and right,
Over the hills and out of sight;
  Green and broad was every tent,
  And out of each a murmur went
Till the breeze fell off at night.

III

The drawbridge dropped with a surly clang,
And through the dark arch a charger sprang,
Bearing Sir Launfal, the maiden knight,

AS SIR LAUNFAL MADE MORN THROUGH THE DARKSOME GATE

In his gilded mail, that flamed so bright
It seemed the dark castle had gathered all
Those shafts the fierce sun had shot over its wall
In his siege of three hundred summers long,
And, binding them all in one blazing sheaf,
Had cast them forth : so, young and strong,
And lightsome as a locust-leaf,
Sir Launfal flashed forth in his maiden mail,
To seek in all climes for the Holy Grail.

IV

It was morning on hill and stream and tree,
And morning in the young knight's heart ;
Only the castle moodily
Rebuffed the gifts of the sunshine free,
And gloomed by itself apart ;
The season brimmed all other things up
Full as the rain fills the pitcher-plant's cup.

V

As Sir Launfal made morn through the darksome gate,
He was 'ware of a leper, crouched by the same,
Who begged with his hand and moaned as he sate ;
And a loathing over Sir Launfal came ;
The sunshine went out of his soul with a thrill,
The flesh 'neath his armor 'gan shrink and crawl,
And midway its leap his heart stood still
Like a frozen waterfall ;
For this man, so foul and bent of stature,
Rasped harshly against his dainty nature,
And seemed the one blot on the summer morn, —
So he tossed him a piece of gold in scorn.

VI

The leper raised not the gold from the dust:
"Better to me the poor man's crust,
Better the blessing of the poor,
Though I turn me empty from his door;
That is no true alms which the hand can hold;
He gives nothing but worthless gold
Who gives from a sense of duty;
But he who gives but a slender mite,
And gives to that which is out of sight,
That thread of the all-sustaining Beauty
Which runs through all and doth all unite,—
The hand cannot clasp the whole of his alms,
The heart outstretches its eager palms,
For a god goes with it and makes it store
To the soul that was starving in darkness before."

PRELUDE TO PART SECOND

Down swept the chill wind from the mountain peak,
From the snow five thousand summers old;

168. In *Beaver Brook* are the lines,

> "To see how Beauty underlies
> Forevermore each form of use,"

and in *The Oak* the lines

> Lord! all Thy works are lessons; each contains
> Some emblem of man's all-containing soul."

The last stanza of *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* suggests in another way that all nature bears a divine message to the observant.

174. Different moods are indicated by the two Preludes. The one is of June, the other of snow and winter; in each, the poet, like an organist, strikes a key which he holds in the subsequent parts. The second Prelude should correspond in literary form and significance with the first. For a discussion of this point, see p. 98. In the letter of Mr. Hosea Biglow, pp. 77–83, the lines

On open wold and hilltop bleak
It had gathered all the cold,
And whirled it like sleet on the wanderer's cheek;
It carried a shiver everywhere
From the unleafed boughs and pastures bare;
The little brook heard it and built a roof
'Neath which he could house him, winter-proof;
All night by the white stars' frosty gleams
He groined his arches and matched his beams;
Slender and clear were his crystal spars
As the lashes of light that trim the stars;
He sculptured every summer delight
In his halls and chambers out of sight;
Sometimes his tinkling waters slipt
Down through a frost-leaved forest-crypt,
Long, sparkling aisles of steel-stemmed trees
Bending to counterfeit a breeze;
Sometimes the roof no fretwork knew
But silvery mosses that downward grew;
Sometimes it was carved in sharp relief
With quaint arabesques of ice-fern leaf;

beginning "Snow-flakes come whisperin' on the pane" suggest, without parallelling, the description of winter given here.

181. In *An Indian-Summer Reverie* is a description of the river in "smooth plate-armor," . . .

"By the frost's clinking hammers forged at night."

The difference in these two descriptions lies chiefly in point of view; the little brook builds himself a house, and literally roofs it above his head. Lowell, in imagination, writes his description of this winter palace of ice from within, personifying the brook as builder and inhabitant. In the other description, written earlier, the river is seen from above, as encased in armor and exposed to the "lances of the sun." Even in the "fresh-sparred grots," and "the grass-arched channels to the sun denied," in the next stanza, the vision in the mind is always of the poet, or

Sometimes it was simply smooth and clear
For the gladness of heaven to shine through, and here
He had caught the nodding bulrush-tops
And hung them thickly with diamond-drops,
That crystalled the beams of moon and sun,
And made a star of every one:
No mortal builder's most rare device
Could match this winter-palace of ice:
'T was as if every image that mirrored lay
In his depths serene through the summer day,
Each fleeting shadow of earth and sky,
Lest the happy model should be lost,
Had been mimicked in fairy masonry
By the elfin builders of the frost.

Within the hall are song and laughter,
The cheeks of Christmas grow red and jolly,
And sprouting is every corbel and rafter
With lightsome green of ivy and holly;

the reader, standing on the bank above and looking down on "the ebbing river."

In the descent of the storm-wind gathering the cold, and in the description of morning, her veins sapless and old, rising up decrepitly "for a last dim look at earth and sea," there is a haunting suggestion of the storm-blast in *The Ancient Mariner* chasing the good ship southward through mist and snow, but there is nowhere an imitation or a borrowed phrase. The true poet catches the very spirit and life from another man's work and thus enriches his own imagination. The resemblance that arises thus is elusive and difficult to trace, and is found, if at all, in a subtle similarity of atmosphere or purpose, or figurative conception, adapted to a new point of view or use.

203. The Empress of Russia, Catherine II, in a magnificent freak, built a palace of ice, which was a nine-days' wonder. Cowper has given a poetical description of it in *The Task*, Book V, lines 131–176. For Lowell's indebtedness to this poem, see p. 103.

Through the deep gulf of the chimney wide
Wallows the Yule-log's roaring tide;
The broad flame-pennons droop and flap
And belly and tug as a flag in the wind;
Like a locust shrills the imprisoned sap,
Hunted to death in its galleries blind;
And swift little troops of silent sparks,
Now pausing, now scattering away as in fear,
Go threading the soot-forest's tangled darks
Like herds of startled deer.

But the wind without was eager and sharp,
Of Sir Launfal's gray hair it makes a harp,
And rattles and wrings
The icy strings,
Singing, in dreary monotone,
A Christmas carol of its own,
Whose burden still, as he might guess,
Was "Shelterless, shelterless, shelterless!"
The voice of the seneschal flared like a torch
As he shouted the wanderer away from the porch,
And he sat in the gateway and saw all night
The great hall-fire, so cheery and bold,
Through the window-slits of the castle old,
Build out its piers of ruddy light
Against the drift of the cold.

216. The Yule-log was anciently a huge log burned at the feast of Juul (pronounced Yule) by our Scandinavian ancestors in honor of the god Thor. Juul-tid (Yule-time) corresponded in time to Christmas tide, and when Christian festivities took the place of pagan, many ceremonies remained. The great log, still called the Yule-log, was dragged in and burned in the fireplace after Thor had been forgotten.

PART SECOND

I

THERE was never a leaf on bush or tree,
The bare boughs rattled shudderingly;
The river was dumb and could not speak,
For the weaver Winter its shroud had spun;
A single crow on the tree-top bleak
From his shining feathers shed off the cold sun;
Again it was morning, but shrunk and cold,
As if her veins were sapless and old,
And she rose up decrepitly
For a last dim look at earth and sea.

II

Sir Launfal turned from his own hard gate,
For another heir in his earldom sate;
An old, bent man, worn out and frail,
He came back from seeking the Holy Grail;
Little he recked of his earldom's loss,
No more on his surcoat was blazoned the cross,
But deep in his soul the sign he wore,
The badge of the suffering and the poor.

III

Sir Launfal's raiment thin and spare
Was idle mail 'gainst the barbed air,
For it was just at the Christmas time:
So he mused, as he sat, of a sunnier clime,
And sought for a shelter from cold and snow
In the light and warmth of long-ago;
He sees the snake-like caravan crawl

SO HE MUSED, AS HE SAT, OF A SUNNIER CLIME

O'er the edge of the desert, black and small,
Then nearer and nearer, till, one by one,
He can count the camels in the sun,
As over the red-hot sands they pass
To where, in its slender necklace of grass,
The little spring laughed and leapt in the shade,
And with its own self like an infant played,
And waved its signal of palms.

IV

For Christ's sweet sake, I beg an alms;" —
The happy camels may reach the spring,
But Sir Launfal sees only the grewsome thing,
The leper, lank as the rain-blanched bone,
That cowers beside him, a thing as lone
And white as the ice-isles of Northern seas
In the desolate horror of his disease.

V

And Sir Launfal said, "I behold in thee
An image of Him who died on the tree;
Thou also hast had thy crown of thorns,
Thou also hast had the world's buffets and scorns,
And to thy life were not denied
The wounds in the hands and feet and side:
Mild Mary's Son, acknowledge me;
Behold, through him, I give to Thee!"

VI

Then the soul of the leper stood up in his eyes
And looked at Sir Launfal, and straightway he
Remembered in what a haughtier guise
He had flung an alms to leprosie,

When he girt his young life up in gilded mail
And set forth in search of the Holy Grail.
The heart within him was ashes and dust;
He parted in twain his single crust,
He broke the ice on the streamlet's brink,
And gave the leper to eat and drink:
'T was a mouldy crust of coarse brown bread,
'T was water out of a wooden bowl, —
Yet with fine wheaten bread was the leper fed,
And 't was red wine he drank with his thirsty soul.

VII

As Sir Launfal mused with a downcast face,
A light shone round about the place;
The leper no longer crouched at his side,
But stood before him glorified,
Shining and tall and fair and straight
As the pillar that stood by the Beautiful Gate, —
Himself the Gate whereby men can
Enter the temple of God in Man.

VIII

His words were shed softer than leaves from the pine,
And they fell on Sir Launfal as snows on the brine,

310. Lowell seems to have used here a figure first suggested by Tennyson's lines,

"music that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass."

The suggestion is remote and must be traced through Lowell's fondness for poetic phrases and an almost unconscious adaptation of the figure to the more severe land of northern cold with which he was familiar. Our poet was also familiar with the source from which Tennyson drew so much of the beautiful imagery of *The Lotos Eaters*, *Œnone*, and other early Idylls. In a letter dated June 28, 1839, he writes: "I have found a treasure to-day, — a

That mingle their softness and quiet in one
With the shaggy unrest they float down upon;
And the voice that was calmer than silence said,
"Lo, it is I, be not afraid!
In many climes, without avail,
Thou hast spent thy life for the Holy Grail;
Behold, it is here, — this cup which thou
Didst fill at the streamlet for Me but now;
This crust is My body broken for thee
This water His blood that died on the tree;
The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need:
Not what we give, but what we share, —
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three, —
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me."

IX

Sir Launfal awoke as from a swound: —
"The Grail in my castle here is found!
Hang my idle armor up on the wall,
Let it be the spider's banquet-hall;
He must be fenced with stronger mail
Who would seek and find the Holy Grail."

X

The castle gate stands open now,
And the wanderer is welcome to the hall

small volume of about five hundred pages; not one of your attenuated modern things that seem like milk and water *watered*, but a goodly fat little fellow and full of the choicest dainties, viz.: Hesiod, Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, and extracts from Orpheus and some forty others, all with a Latin translation *ad verbum*.

As the hangbird is to the elm-tree bough;
No longer scowl the turrets tall,
The Summer's long siege at last is o'er;
When the first poor outcast went in at the door,
She entered with him in disguise,
And mastered the fortress by surprise;
There is no spot she loves so well on ground,
She lingers and smiles there the whole year round;
The meanest serf on Sir Launfal's land
Has hall and bower at his command;
And there 's no poor man in the North Countree
But is lord of the earldom as much as he.

POEMS HAVING A SPECIAL RELATION TO THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL. GROUP A[1]

THE SEARCH

I WENT to seek for Christ,
And Nature seemed so fair
That first the woods and fields my youth enticed,
And I was sure to find him there:
The temple I forsook,
And to the solitude
Allegiance paid; but Winter came and shook
The crown and purple from my wood;
His snows, like desert sands, with scornful drift,
Besieged the columned aisle and palace-gate;
My Thebes, cut deep with many a solemn rift,
But epitaphed her own sepulchred state:
Then I remembered whom I went to seek,
And blessed blunt Winter for his counsel bleak.

[1] See *The Study of The Vision of Sir Launfal*, p. 91.

Back to the world I turned,
For Christ, I said, is King;
So the cramped alley and the hut I spurned,
As far beneath his sojourning:
Mid power and wealth I sought,
But found no trace of him,
And all the costly offerings I had brought
With sudden rust and mould grew dim:
I found his tomb, indeed, where, by their laws,
All must on stated days themselves imprison,
Mocking with bread a dead creed's grinning jaws,
Witless how long the life had thence arisen;
Due sacrifice to this they set apart,
Prizing it more than Christ's own living heart.

So from my feet the dust
Of the proud World I shook;
Then came dear Love and shared with me his crust,
And half my sorrow's burden took.
After the World's soft bed,
Its rich and dainty fare,
Like down seemed Love's coarse pillow to my head,
His cheap food seemed as manna rare;
Fresh-trodden prints of bare and bleeding feet,
Turned to the heedless city whence I came,
Hard by I saw, and springs of worship sweet
Gushed from my cleft heart smitten by the same;
Love looked me in the face and spake no words,
But straight I knew those footprints were the Lord's.

I followed where they led,
And in a hovel rude,
With naught to fence the weather from his head,

The King I sought for meekly stood;
A naked, hungry child
Clung round his gracious knee,
And a poor hunted slave looked up and smiled
To bless the smile that set him free;
New miracles I saw his presence do, —
No more I knew the hovel bare and poor,
The gathered chips into a woodpile grew,
The broken morsel swelled to goodly store:
I knelt and wept: my Christ no more I seek,
His throne is with the outcast and the weak.

A PARABLE

Said Christ our Lord, "I will go and see
How the men, my brethren, believe in me."
He passed not again through the gate of birth,
But made himself known to the children of earth.

Then said the chief priests, and rulers, and kings,
"Behold, now, the Giver of all good things;
Go to, let us welcome with pomp and state
Him who alone is mighty and great."

With carpets of gold the ground they spread
Wherever the Son of Man should tread,
And in palace-chambers lofty and rare
They lodged him, and served him with kingly fare.

Great organs surged through arches dim
Their jubilant floods in praise of him:
And in church, and palace, and judgment-hall,
He saw his own image high over all.

But still, wherever his steps they led,
The Lord in sorrow bent down his head,
And from under the heavy foundation-stones,
The son of Mary heard bitter groans.

And in church, and palace, and judgment-hall,
He marked great fissures that rent the wall,
And opened wider and yet more wide
As the living foundation heaved and sighed.

"Have ye founded your thrones and altars, then,
On the bodies and souls of living men?
And think ye that building shall endure,
Which shelters the noble and crushes the poor?

"With gates of silver and bars of gold
Ye have fenced my sheep from their Father's fold;
I have heard the dropping of their tears
In heaven these eighteen hundred years."

"O Lord and Master, not ours the guilt,
We build but as our fathers built;
Behold thine images, how they stand,
Sovereign and sole, through all our land.

"Our task is hard, — with sword and flame
To hold thine earth forever the same,
And with sharp crooks of steel to keep
Still, as thou leftest them, thy sheep."

Then Christ sought out an artisan,
A low-browed, stunted, haggard man,
And a motherless girl, whose fingers thin
Pushed from her faintly want and sin.

These set he in the midst of them,
And as they drew back their garment-hem,
For fear of defilement, "Lo, here," said he,
"The images ye have made of me!"

FREEDOM

Are we, then, wholly fallen? Can it be
That thou, North wind, that from thy mountains bringest
Their spirit to our plains, and thou, blue sea,
Who on our rocks thy wreaths of freedom flingest,
As on an altar, — can it be that ye
Have wasted inspiration on dead ears,
Dulled with the too familiar clank of chains?
The people's heart is like a harp for years
Hung where some petrifying torrent rains
Its slow-incrusting spray: the stiffened chords
Faint and more faint make answer to the tears
That drip upon them: idle are all words:
Only a golden plectrum wakes the tone
Deep buried 'neath that ever-thickening stone.

We are not free: doth Freedom, then, consist
In musing with our faces toward the Past,
While petty cares and crawling interests twist
Their spider-threads about us, which at last
Grow strong as iron chains, to cramp and bind
In formal narrowness heart, soul, and mind?
Freedom is re-created year by year,
In hearts wide open on the Godward side,
In souls calm-cadenced as the whirling sphere,
In minds that sway the future like a tide.

No broadest creeds can hold her, and no codes;
She chooses men for her august abodes,
Building them fair and fronting to the dawn;
Yet, when we seek her, we but find a few
Light footprints, leading morn-ward through the dew:
Before the day had risen, she was gone.

And we must follow: swiftly runs she on,
And, if our steps should slacken in despair,
Half turns her face, half smiles through golden hair,
Forever yielding, never wholly won:
That is not love which pauses in the race
Two close-linked names on fleeting sand to trace;
Freedom gained yesterday is no more ours;
Men gather but dry seeds of last year's flowers;
Still there 's a charm ungranted, still a grace,
Still rosy Hope, the free, the unattained,
Makes us Possession's languid hand let fall;
'T is but a fragment of ourselves is gained,
The Future brings us more, but never all.

And, as the finder of some unknown realm,
Mounting a summit whence he thinks to see
On either side of him the imprisoning sea,
Beholds, above the clouds that overwhelm
The valley-land, peak after snowy peak
Stretch out of sight, each like a silver helm
Beneath its plume of smoke, sublime and bleak,
And what he thought an island finds to be
A continent to him first oped, — so we
Can from our height of Freedom look along
A boundless future, ours if we be strong;

Or if we shrink, better remount our ships
And, fleeing God's express design, trace back
The hero-freighted Mayflower's prophet-track
To Europe entering her blood-red eclipse.[1]

STANZAS ON FREEDOM

Sung at the anti-slavery picnic in Dedham, on the anniversary of West Indian Emancipation, August 1, 1843.

MEN! whose boast it is that ye
Come of fathers brave and free,
If there breathe on earth a slave,
Are ye truly free and brave?
If ye do not feel the chain,
When it works a brother's pain,
Are ye not base slaves indeed,
Slaves unworthy to be freed?

Women! who shall one day bear
Sons to breathe New England air,
If ye hear, without a blush,
Deeds to make the roused blood rush
Like red lava through your veins,
For your sisters now in chains, —
Answer! are ye fit to be
Mothers of the brave and free?

Is true Freedom but to break
Fetters for our own dear sake,
And, with leathern hearts, forget
That we owe mankind a debt?

[1] See Lowell's *Letters*, ii, 36, for the last part of this poem as originally written, and for Lowell's comment.

No! true Freedom is to share
All the chains our brothers wear,
And, with heart and hand, to be
Earnest to make others free!

They are slaves who fear to speak
For the fallen and the weak;
They are slaves who will not choose
Hatred, scoffing, and abuse,
Rather than in silence shrink
From the truth they needs must think;
They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three.

BIBLIOLATRES

Bowing thyself in dust before a Book,
And thinking the great God is thine alone,
O rash iconoclast, thou wilt not brook
What gods the heathen carves in wood and stone,
As if the Shepherd who from outer cold
Leads all his shivering lambs to one sure fold
Were careful for the fashion of His crook.

There is no broken reed so poor and base,
No rush, the bending tilt of swamp-fly blue,
But He therewith the ravening wolf can chase,
And guide His flock to springs and pastures new;
Through ways unlooked for, and through many lands,
Far from the rich folds built with human hands,
The gracious footprints of His love I trace.

And what art thou, own brother of the clod,
That from His hand the crook would'st snatch away

And shake instead thy dry and sapless rod,
To scare the sheep out of the wholesome day?
Yea, what art thou, blind, unconverted Jew,
That with thy idol-volume's covers two
Would'st make a jail to coop the living God?

Thou hear'st not well the mountain organ-tones
By prophet ears from Hor and Sinai caught,
Thinking the cisterns of those Hebrew brains
Drew dry the springs of the All-knower's thought,
Nor shall thy lips be touched with living fire,
Who blow'st old altar-coals with sole desire
To weld anew the spirit's broken chains.

God is not dumb, that He should speak no more;
If thou hast wanderings in the wilderness
And find'st not Sinai, 't is thy soul is poor;
There towers the Mountain of the Voice no less,
Which whoso seeks shall find, but he who bends,
Intent on manna still and mortal ends,
Sees it not, neither hears its thundered lore.

Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,
And not on paper leaves nor leaves of stone;
Each age, each kindred, adds a verse to it,
Texts of despair or hope, of joy or moan,
While swings the sea, while mists the mountains shroud,
While thunder's surges burst on cliffs of cloud,
Still at the prophets' feet the nations sit.

THE PRESENT CRISIS

[In the year 1844, which is the date of the following poem, the question of the annexation of Texas was pending, and it was made an issue of the presidential campaign then taking place. The anti-slavery party feared and opposed annexation, on account of the added strength which it would give to slavery, and the South desired it for the same reason.]

WHEN a deed is done for Freedom, through the broad
earth's aching breast
Runs a thrill of joy prophetic, trembling on from east
to west,
And the slave, where'er he cowers, feels the soul within
him climb
To the awful verge of manhood, as the energy sublime
Of a century bursts full-blossomed on the thorny stem
of Time.

Through the walls of hut and palace shoots the instan-
taneous throe,
When the travail of the Ages wrings earth's systems to
and fro;
At the birth of each new Era, with a recognizing start,
Nation wildly looks at nation, standing with mute lips
apart,
And glad Truth's yet mightier man-child leaps beneath
the Future's heart.

So the Evil's triumph sendeth, with a terror and a chill,
Under continent to continent, the sense of coming ill,
And the slave, where'er he cowers, feels his sympathies
with God

In hot tear-drops ebbing earthward, to be drunk up by the sod,
Till a corpse crawls round unburied, delving in the nobler clod.

For mankind are one in spirit, and an instinct bears along,
Round the earth's electric circle, the swift flash of right or wrong;
Whether conscious or unconscious, yet Humanity's vast frame
Through its ocean-sundered fibres feels the gush of joy or shame; —
In the gain or loss of one race all the rest have equal claim.

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light.

Hast thou chosen, O my people, on whose party thou shalt stand,
Ere the Doom from its worn sandals shakes the dust against our land?

17. This figure has special force from the fact that Morse's telegraph was first put in operation a few months before the writing of this poem.

Though the cause of Evil prosper, yet 't is Truth alone is strong,
And, albeit she wander outcast now, I see around her throng
Troops of beautiful, tall angels, to enshield her from all wrong.

Backward look across the ages and the beacon-moments see,
That, like peaks of some sunk continent, jut through Oblivion's sea;
Not an ear in court or market for the low foreboding cry
Of those Crises, God's stern winnowers, from whose feet earth's chaff must fly;
Never shows the choice momentous till the judgment hath passed by.

Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne, —
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

29. Compare

> "Truth crushed to earth shall rise again,
> The eternal years of God are hers."
>
> BRYANT.

37. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

We see dimly in the Present what is small and what is great,
Slow of faith how weak an arm may turn the iron helm of fate,
But the soul is still oracular; amid the market's din,
List the ominous stern whisper from the Delphic cave within, —
"They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin."

Slavery, the earth-born Cyclops, fellest of the giant brood,
Sons of brutish Force and Darkness, who have drenched the earth with blood,
Famished in his self-made desert, blinded by our purer day,
Gropes in yet unblasted regions for his miserable prey; —
Shall we guide his gory fingers where our helpless children play?

Then to side with Truth is noble when we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 't is prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses, while the coward stands aside,
Doubting in his abject spirit, till his Lord is crucified,
And the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.

50. For the full story of Cyclops, which runs in suggestive phrase through these five lines, see the ninth book of the Odyssey. The translation by G. H. Palmer will be found especially satisfactory.

Count me o'er earth's chosen heroes, — they were souls that stood alone,
While the men they agonized for hurled the contumelious stone,
Stood serene, and down the future saw the golden beam incline
To the side of perfect justice, mastered by their faith divine,
By one man's plain truth to manhood and to God's supreme design.

By the light of burning heretics Christ's bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever with the cross that turns not back,
And these mounts of anguish number how each generation learned
One new word of that grand *Credo* which in prophet-hearts hath burned
Since the first man stood God-conquered with his face to heaven upturned.

For Humanity sweeps onward: where to-day the martyr stands,
On the morrow crouches Judas with the silver in his hands;
Far in front the cross stands ready and the crackling fagots burn,
While the hooting mob of yesterday in silent awe return
To glean up the scattered ashes into History's golden urn.

'T is as easy to be heroes as to sit the idle slaves
Of a legendary virtue carved upon our fathers' graves,
Worshippers of light ancestral make the present light a crime ; —
Was the Mayflower launched by cowards, steered by men behind their time?
Turn those tracks toward Past or Future, that make Plymouth Rock sublime?

They were men of present valor, stalwart old iconoclasts,
Unconvinced by axe or gibbet that all virtue was the Past's ;
But we make their truth our falsehood, thinking that hath made us free,
Hoarding it in mouldy parchments, while our tender spirits flee
The rude grasp of that great Impulse which drove them across the sea.

They have rights who dare maintain them; we are traitors to our sires,
Smothering in their holy ashes Freedom's new-lit altar-fires ;
Shall we make their creed our jailer? Shall we, in our haste to slay,
From the tombs of the old prophets steal the funeral lamps away
To light up the martyr-fagots round the prophets of to-day?

New occasions teach new duties ; Time makes ancient good uncouth ;

They must upward still, and onward, who would keep
abreast of Truth;
Lo, before us gleam her camp-fires! we ourselves must
Pilgrims be.
Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly through the
desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the Future's portal with the Past's blood-
rusted key. 90

TO W. L. GARRISON

"Some time afterward, it was reported to me by the city officers that they had ferreted out the paper and its editor; that his office was an obscure hole, his only visible auxiliary a negro boy, and his supporters a few very insignificant persons of all colors." — *Letter of H. G. Otis.*

In a small chamber, friendless and unseen,
Toiled o'er his types one poor, unlearned young
man;
The place was dark, unfurnitured, and mean; —
Yet there the freedom of a race began.

Help came but slowly; surely no man yet 5
Put lever to the heavy world with less:
What need of help? He knew how types were set,
He had a dauntless spirit, and a press.

Such earnest natures are the fiery pith,
The compact nucleus, round which systems grow; 10
Mass after mass becomes inspired therewith,
And whirls impregnate with the central glow.

6. Archimedes, a great philosopher of antiquity, used to say, "Only give me a place to stand on, and I will move the world with my lever."

O Truth! O Freedom! how are ye still born
In the rude stable, in the manger nursed!
What humble hands unbar those gates of morn
Through which the splendors of the New Day burst!

What! shall one monk, scarce known beyond his cell,
Front Rome's far-reaching bolts, and scorn her frown?
Brave Luther answered YES; that thunder's swell
Rocked Europe, and discharmed the triple crown.

Whatever can be known of earth we know,
Sneered Europe's wise men, in their snail-shells curled;
No! said one man in Genoa, and that No
Out of the dark created this New World.

Who is it will not dare himself to trust?
Who is it hath not strength to stand alone?
Who is it thwarts and bilks the inward MUST?
He and his works, like sand, from earth are blown.

Men of a thousand shifts and wiles, look here!
See one straightforward conscience put in pawn
To win a world: see the obedient sphere
By bravery's simple gravitation drawn!

Shall we not heed the lesson taught of old,
And by the Present's lips repeated still,
In our own single manhood to be bold,
Fortressed in conscience and impregnable will?

We stride the river daily at its spring,
Nor, in our childish thoughtlessness, foresee,
What myriad vassal streams shall tribute bring,
How like an equal it shall greet the sea.

O small beginnings, ye are great and strong,
Based on a faithful heart and weariless brain!
Ye build the future fair, ye conquer wrong,
Ye earn the crown, and wear it not in vain.

WENDELL PHILLIPS

He stood upon the world's broad threshold; wide
The din of battle and of slaughter rose;
He saw God stand upon the weaker side,
That sank in seeming loss before its foes:
Many there were who made great haste and sold
Unto the cunning enemy their swords,
He scorned their gifts of fame, and power, and gold,
And, underneath their soft and flowery words,
Heard the cold serpent hiss; therefore he went
And humbly joined him to the weaker part,
Fanatic named, and fool, yet well content
So he could be the nearer to God's heart,
And feel its solemn pulses sending blood
Through all the widespread veins of endless good.

POEMS HAVING A SPECIAL RELATION TO THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL. GROUP B [1]

"Indeed, there could scarcely have been a better nesting place for one who was all his life long to love the animation of nature and to portray in verse and prose its homely and friendly aspects rather than its large, solemn, and expansive scenes. . . . From the upper windows of the house — that tower of enchantment for many a child — he could see a long curve of the Charles, the wide marshes beyond the river, and the fields which lay between Elmwood and the village of Cambridge. Within the place itself were the rose-bushes and asters, the heavy headed goat's-beard, the lilac bushes and syringas which bordered the path from the door to what his father, in New England phrase, called the avenue, and which later became formally Elmwood Avenue. . . . And in the trees and bushes sang the birds that were to be his companions through life. Over the buttercups whistled the orioles; and bobolinks, catbirds, linnets, and robins were to teach him notes, —

> The Aladdin's trap-door of the past to lift.

A spring morning which witnessed the sudden miracle of regeneration; an hour of summer, when he sat dappled with sunshine, in a cherry-tree; a day in autumn, when the falling leaves moved as an accompaniment to his thought: the creaking of the snow beneath his feet, when the familiar world was transformed as in a vision to a polar solitude: —

> Instant the candid chambers of my brain
> Were painted with these sovran images;
> And later visions seem but copies pale
> From those unfading frescos of the past,
> Which I, young savage, in my age of flint,
> Gazed at, and dimly felt a power in me
> Parted from nature by the joy in her
> That doubtfully revealed me to myself."
>
> Scudder's *James Russell Lowell.*

[1] See *The Study of The Vision of Sir Launfal*, p. 94.

BEAVER BROOK

Hushed with broad sunlight lies the hill,
And, minuting the long day's loss,
The cedar's shadow, slow and still,
Creeps o'er its dial of gray moss.

Warm noon brims full the valley's cup,
The aspen's leaves are scarce astir;
Only the little mill sends up
Its busy, never-ceasing burr.

Climbing the loose-piled wall that hems
The road along the mill-pond's brink,
From 'neath the arching barberry-stems
My footstep scares the shy chewink.

Beneath a bony buttonwood
The mill's red door lets forth the din;
The whitened miller, dust-imbued,
Flits past the square of dark within.

No mountain torrent's strength is here;
Sweet Beaver, child of forest still,
Heaps its small pitcher to the ear,
And gently waits the miller's will.

Swift slips Undine along the race
Unheard, and then, with flashing bound,
Floods the dull wheel with light and grace,
And, laughing, hunts the loath drudge round.

18. Beaver Brook was within walking distance of the poet's home. See *The Nightingale in the Study* and *Mr. Hosea Biglow to the Editor of the Atlantic Monthly.*

The miller dreams not at what cost
The quivering millstones hum and whirl,
Nor how for every turn are tost
Armfuls of diamond and of pearl.

But Summer cleared my happier eyes
With drops of some celestial juice,
To see how Beauty underlies,
Forevermore each form of use.

And more ; methought I saw that flood,
Which now so dull and darkling steals,
Thick, here and there, with human blood,
To turn the world's laborious wheels.

No more than doth the miller there,
Shut in our several cells, do we
Know with what waste of beauty rare
Moves every day's machinery.

Surely the wiser time shall come
When this fine overplus of might,
No longer sullen, slow, and dumb,
Shall leap to music and to light.

In that new childhood of the Earth
Life of itself shall dance and play,
Fresh blood in Time's shrunk veins make mirth,
And labor meet delight half-way.

AL FRESCO

"The Mill," 1849.

The dandelions and buttercups
Gild all the lawn; the drowsy bee
Stumbles among the clover-tops,
And summer sweetens all but me:
Away, unfruitful lore of books,
For whose vain idiom we reject
The soul's more native dialect,
Aliens among the birds and brooks,
Dull to interpret or conceive
What gospels lost the woods retrieve!
Away, ye critics, city-bred,
Who springes set of thus and so,
And in the first man's footsteps tread,
Like those who toil through drifted snow!
Away, my poets, whose sweet spell
Can make a garden of a cell!
I need ye not, for I to-day
Will make one long sweet verse of play.

Snap, chord of manhood's tenser strain!
To-day I will be a boy again;
The mind's pursuing element,
Like a bow slackened and unbent,
In some dark corner shall be leant.
The robin sings, as of old, from the limb!
The catbird croons in the lilac bush!

15. There is a delightful pair of poems by Wordsworth, *Expostulation and Reply*, and *The Tables Turned*, which show how another poet treats books and nature.

Through the dim arbor, himself more dim,
Silently hops the hermit-thrush,
The withered leaves keep dumb for him;
The irreverent buccaneering bee
Hath stormed and rifled the nunnery
Of the lily, and scattered the sacred floor
With haste-dropt gold from shrine to door:
There, as of yore,
The rich, milk-tingeing buttercup
Its tiny polished urn holds up,
Filled with ripe summer to the edge,
The sun in his own wine to pledge;
And our tall elm, this hundredth year
Doge of our leafy Venice here,
Who, with an annual ring, doth wed
The blue Adriatic overhead,
Shadows with his palatial mass
The deep canals of flowing grass.

O unestranged birds and bees!
O face of Nature always true!
O never-unsympathizing trees!
O never-rejecting roof of blue,
Whose rash disherison never falls
On us unthinking prodigals,
Yet who convictest all our ill,
So grand and unappeasable!
Methinks my heart from each of these
Plucks part of childhood back again,
Long there imprisoned, as the breeze
Doth every hidden odor seize
Of wood and water, hill and plain;
Once more am I admitted peer

In the upper house of Nature here,
And feel through all my pulses run
The royal blood of breeze and sun.

Upon these elm-arched solitudes
No hum of neighbor toil intrudes;
The only hammer that I hear
Is wielded by the woodpecker,
The single noisy calling his
In all our leaf-hid Sybaris;
The good old time, close-hidden here,
Persists, a loyal cavalier,
While Roundheads prim, with point of fox,
Probe wainscot-chink and empty box;
Here no hoarse-voiced iconoclast
Insults thy statues, royal Past;
Myself too prone the axe to wield,
I touch the silver side of the shield
With lance reversed, and challenge peace,
A willing convert of the trees.

How chanced it that so long I tost
A cable's length from this rich coast,
With foolish anchors hugging close
The beckoning weeds and lazy ooze,
Nor had the wit to wreck before
On this enchanted island's shore,
Whither the current of the sea,
With wiser drift, persuaded me?

O, might we but of such rare days
Build up the spirit's dwelling-place!

A temple of so Parian stone
Would brook a marble god alone,
The statue of a perfect life,
Far-shrined from earth's bestaining strife.
Alas! though such felicity
In our vext world here may not be,
Yet, as sometimes the peasant's hut
Shows stones which old religion cut
With text inspired, or mystic sign
Of the Eternal and Divine,
Torn from the consecration deep
Of some fallen nunnery's mossy sleep,
So, from the ruins of this day
Crumbling in golden dust away,
The soul one gracious block may draw,
Carved with some fragment of the law,
Which, set in life's prosaic wall,
Old benedictions may recall,
And lure some nunlike thoughts to take
Their dwelling here for memory's sake.

AN INDIAN-SUMMER REVERIE

[When Mr. Lowell wrote this poem he was living at Elmwood in Cambridge, at that time quite remote from town influences, — Cambridge itself being scarcely more than a village, — but now rapidly losing its rustic surroundings. The Charles River flowed near by, then a limpid stream, untroubled by factories or sewage. It is a tidal river and not far from Elmwood winds through broad salt marshes. Mr. Longfellow's old home is a short stroll nearer town, and the two poets exchanged pleasant shots, as may be seen by Lowell's *To H. W. L.*, and Longfellow's *The Herons of Elmwood*. In *Under the Willows* Mr. Lowell has, as it were, indulged in another reverie at a later period of his life, among the same familiar surroundings.]

What visionary tints the year puts on,
When falling leaves falter through motionless air
Or numbly cling and shiver to be gone!
How shimmer the low flats and pastures bare,
As with her nectar Hebe Autumn fills
The bowl between me and those distant hills,
And smiles and shakes abroad her misty, tremulous hair!

No more the landscape holds its wealth apart,
Making me poorer in my poverty,
But mingles with my senses and my heart;
My own projected spirit seems to me
In her own reverie the world to steep;
'T is she that waves to sympathetic sleep,
Moving, as she is moved, each field and hill and tree.

How fuse and mix, with what unfelt degrees,
Clasped by the faint horizon's languid arms,
Each into each, the hazy distances!
The softened season all the landscape charms;
Those hills, my native village that embay,
In waves of dreamier purple roll away,
And floating in mirage seem all the glimmering farms.

Far distant sounds the hidden chickadee
Close at my side; far distant sound the leaves;
The fields seem fields of dream, where Memory
Wanders like gleaning Ruth; and as the sheaves
Of wheat and barley wavered in the eye
Of Boaz as the maiden's glow went by,
So tremble and seem remote all things the sense receives.

The cock's shrill trump that tells of scattered corn,
Passed breezily on by all his flapping mates,
Faint and more faint, from barn to barn is borne,
Southward, perhaps to far Magellan's Straits;
Dimly I catch the throb of distant flails;
Silently overhead the hen-hawk sails,
With watchful, measuring eye, and for his quarry waits.

The sobered robin, hunger-silent now,
Seeks cedar-berries blue, his autumn cheer;
The chipmunk, on the shingly shagbark's bough,
Now saws, now lists with downward eye and ear,
Then drops his nut, and, with a chipping bound,
Whisks to his winding fastness underground;
The clouds like swans drift down the streaming atmosphere.

O'er yon bare knoll the pointed cedar shadows
Drowse on the crisp, gray moss; the ploughman's call
Creeps faint as smoke from black, fresh-furrowed meadows;
The single crow a single caw lets fall;
And all around me every bush and tree
Says Autumn 's here, and Winter soon will be,
Who snows his soft, white sleep and silence over all.

The birch, most shy and ladylike of trees,
Her poverty, as best she may, retrieves,
And hints at her foregone gentilities
With some saved relics of her wealth of leaves;
The swamp-oak, with his royal purple on,
Glares red as blood across the sinking sun,
As one who proudlier to a falling fortune cleaves.

He looks a sachem, in red blanket wrapt,
Who, 'mid some council of the sad-garbed whites,
Erect and stern, in his own memories lapt,
With distant eye broods over other sights,
Sees the hushed wood the city's flare replace,
The wounded turf heal o'er the railway's trace,
And roams the savage Past of his undwindled rights.

The red-oak, softer-grained, yields all for lost,
And, with his crumpled foliage stiff and dry,
After the first betrayal of the frost,
Rebuffs the kiss of the relenting sky;
The chestnuts, lavish of their long-hid gold,
To the faint Summer, beggared now and old,
Pour back the sunshine hoarded 'neath her favoring eye.

The ash her purple drops forgivingly
And sadly, breaking not the general hush;
The maple-swamps glow like a sunset sea,
Each leaf a ripple with its separate flush;
All round the wood's edge creeps the skirting blaze
Of bushes low, as when, on cloudy days,
Ere the rain falls, the cautious farmer burns his brush.

O'er yon low wall, which guards one unkempt zone,
Where vines and weeds and scrub-oaks intertwine
Safe from the plough, whose rough, discordant stone
Is massed to one soft gray by lichens fine,
The tangled blackberry, crossed and recrossed, weaves
A prickly network of ensanguined leaves;
Hard by, with coral beads, the prim black-alders shine.

Pillaring with flame this crumbling boundary,
Whose loose blocks topple 'neath the ploughboy's foot,
Who, with each sense shut fast except the eye,
Creeps close and scares the jay he hoped to shoot,
The woodbine up the elm's straight stem aspires,
Coiling it, harmless, with autumnal fires;
In the ivy's paler blaze the martyr oak stands mute.

Below, the Charles, a stripe of nether sky,
Now hid by rounded apple-trees between,
Whose gaps the misplaced sail sweeps bellying by,
Now flickering golden through a woodland screen,
Then spreading out, at his next turn beyond,
A silver circle like an inland pond —
Slips seaward silently through marshes purple and green.

Dear marshes! vain to him the gift of sight
Who cannot in their various incomes share,
From every season drawn, of shade and light,
Who sees in them but levels brown and bare;
Each change of storm or sunshine scatters free
On them its largess of variety,
For Nature with cheap means still works her wonders rare.

In Spring they lie one broad expanse of green,
O'er which the light winds run with glimmering feet:
Here, yellower stripes track out the creek unseen,
There, darker growths o'er hidden ditches meet;

And purpler stains show where the blossoms crowd,
As if the silent shadow of a cloud
Hung there becalmed, with the next breath to fleet.

All round, upon the river's slippery edge,
Witching to deeper calm the drowsy tide,
Whispers and leans the breeze-entangling sedge;
Through emerald glooms the lingering waters slide,
Or, sometimes wavering, throw back the sun,
And the stiff banks in eddies melt and run
Of dimpling light, and with the current seem to glide.

In Summer 't is a blithesome sight to see,
As, step by step, with measured swing, they pass,
The wide-ranked mowers wading to the knee,
Their sharp scythes panting through the wiry grass;
Then, stretched beneath a rick's shade in a ring,
Their nooning take, while one begins to sing
A stave that droops and dies 'neath the close sky of brass.

Meanwhile that devil-may-care, the bobolink,
Remembering duty, in mid-quaver stops
Just ere he sweeps o'er rapture's tremulous brink,
And 'twixt the winrows most demurely drops,
A decorous bird of business, who provides
For his brown mate and fledglings six besides,
And looks from right to left, a farmer 'mid his crops.

Another change subdues them in the Fall,
But saddens not; they still show merrier tints,
Though sober russet seems to cover all;
When the first sunshine through their dewdrops glints,
Look how the yellow clearness, streamed across,
Redeems with rarer hues the season's loss,
As Dawn's feet there had touched and left their rosy prints.

Or come when sunset gives its freshened zest,
Lean o'er the bridge and let the ruddy thrill,
While the shorn sun swells down the hazy west,
Glow opposite; — the marshes drink their fill
And swoon with purple veins, then slowly fade
Through pink to brown, as eastward moves the shade,
Lengthening with stealthy creep, of Simond's darkening hill.

Later, and yet ere Winter wholly shuts,
Ere through the first dry snow the runner grates,
And the loath cart-wheel screams in slippery ruts,
While firmer ice the eager boy awaits,
Trying each buckle and strap beside the fire,
And until bedtime plays with his desire,
Twenty times putting on and off his new-bought skates; —

Then, every morn, the river's banks shine bright
With smooth plate-armor, treacherous and frail,

By the frost's clinking hammers forged at night,
'Gainst which the lances of the sun prevail,
Giving a pretty emblem of the day
When guiltier arms in light shall melt away,
And states shall move free-limbed, loosed from war's cramping mail.

And now those waterfalls the ebbing river
Twice every day creates on either side
Tinkle, as through their fresh-sparred grots they shiver
In grass-arched channels to the sun denied;
High flaps in sparkling blue the far-heard crow,
The silvered flats gleam frostily below,
Suddenly drops the gull and breaks the glassy tide.

But crowned in turn by vying seasons three,
Their winter halo hath a fuller ring;
This glory seems to rest immovably, —
The others were too fleet and vanishing;
When the hid tide is at its highest flow,
O'er marsh and stream one breathless trance of snow
With brooding fulness awes and hushes everything.

The sunshine seems blown off by the bleak wind,
As pale as formal candles lit by day;
Gropes to the sea the river dumb and blind;
The brown ricks, snow-thatched by the storm in play,
Show pearly breakers combing o'er their lee,
White crests as of some just enchanted sea,
Checked in their maddest leap and hanging poised midway.

But when the eastern blow, with rain aslant,
From mid-sea's prairies green and rolling plains
Drives in his wallowing herds of billows gaunt,
And the roused Charles remembers in his veins
Old Ocean's blood and snaps his gyves of frost,
That tyrannous silence on the shores is tost
In dreary wreck, and crumbling desolation reigns.

Edgewise or flat, in Druid-like device,
With leaden pools between or gullies bare,
The blocks lie strewn, a bleak Stonehenge of ice;
No life, no sound, to break the grim despair,
Save sullen plunge, as through the sedges stiff
Down crackles riverward some thaw-sapped cliff,
Or when the close-wedged fields of ice crunch here and there.

But let me turn from fancy-pictured scenes
To that whose pastoral calm before me lies:
Here nothing harsh or rugged intervenes;
The early evening with her misty dyes
Smooths off the ravelled edges of the nigh,
Relieves the distant with her cooler sky,
And tones the landscape down, and soothes the wearied eyes.

There gleams my native village, dear to me,
Though higher change's waves each day are seen,
Whelming fields famed in boyhood's history,
Sanding with houses the diminished green;
There, in red brick, which softening time defies,
Stand square and stiff the Muses' factories: —
How with my life knit up is every well-known scene!

Flow on, dear river! not alone you flow
To outward sight, and through your marshes wind;
Fed from the mystic springs of long-ago,
Your twin flows silent through my world of mind:
Grow dim, dear marshes, in the evening's gray!
Before my inner sight ye stretch away,
And will forever, though these fleshly eyes grow blind.

Beyond the hillock's house-bespotted swell,
Where Gothic chapels house the horse and chaise,
Where quiet cits in Grecian temples dwell,
Where Coptic tombs resound with prayer and praise,
Where dust and mud the equal year divide,
There gentle Allston lived, and wrought, and died,
Transfiguring street and shop with his illumined gaze.

Virgilium vidi tantum, — I have seen
But as a boy, who looks alike on all,
That misty hair, that fine Undine-like mien,
Tremulous as down to feeling's faintest call; —
Ah, dear old homestead! count it to thy fame
That thither many times the Painter came; —
One elm yet bears his name, a feathery tree and tall.

223. In *Cambridge Thirty Years Ago*, which treats in prose of much the same period as this poem reproduces, Mr. Lowell has given more in detail his recollections of Washington Allston, the painter. The whole paper may be read as a prose counterpart to this poem. It is published in *Fireside Travels*.

225. *Virgilium vidi tantum*, I barely saw Virgil, a Latin phrase applied to one who has merely had a glimpse of a great man.

227. Undine is the heroine of a romantic tale by Baron De la Motte Fouqué. She is represented as a water-nymph who wins a human soul only by a union with mortality which brings pain and sorrow.

Swiftly the present fades in memory's glow, —
Our only sure possession is the past;
The village blacksmith died a month ago,
And dim to me the forge's roaring blast;
Soon fire-new mediævals we shall see
Oust the black smithy from its chestnut-tree,
And that hewn down, perhaps, the bee-hive green and vast.

How many times, prouder than king on throne,
Loosed from the village school-dame's A's and B's,
Panting have I the creaky bellows blown,
And watched the pent volcano's red increase,
Then paused to see the ponderous sledge, brought down
By that hard arm voluminous and brown,
From the white iron swarm its golden vanishing bees.

Dear native town! whose choking elms each year
With eddying dust before their time turn gray,
Pining for rain, — to me thy dust is dear;
It glorifies the eve of summer day,
And when the westering sun half sunken burns,
The mote-thick air to deepest orange turns,
The westward horseman rides through clouds of gold away.

So palpable, I 've seen those unshorn few,
The six old willows at the causey's end

234. The village blacksmith of Longfellow's well-known poem. The prophecy came true as regards the hewing-down of the chestnut-tree, which was cut down in 1876.

(Such trees Paul Potter never dreamed nor drew),
Through this dry mist their checkering shadows send,
Striped, here and there, with many a long-drawn thread,
Where streamed through leafy chinks the trembling red,
Past which, in one bright trail, the hangbird's flashes blend.

Yes, dearer far thy dust than all that e'er,
Beneath the awarded crown of victory,
Gilded the blown Olympic charioteer;
Though lightly prized the ribboned parchments three,
Yet *collegisse juvat*, I am glad
That here what colleging was mine I had, —
It linked another tie, dear native town, with thee!

Nearer art thou than simply native earth,
My dust with thine concedes a deeper tie;
A closer claim thy soil may well put forth,
Something of kindred more than sympathy;
For in thy bounds I reverently laid away
That blinding anguish of forsaken clay,
That title I seemed to have in earth and sea and sky,

264. *Collegisse juvat.* Horace in his first ode says, *Curriculo pulverem Olympicum Collegisse juvat;* that is, *It's a pleasure to have collected* the dust of Olympus on your carriage-wheels. Mr. Lowell, helping himself to the words, says, "It's a pleasure to have been at college;" for college in its first meaning is a *collection* of men, as in the phrase "The college of cardinals."

That portion of my life more choice to me
(Though brief, yet in itself so round and whole)
Than all the imperfect residue can be; —
The Artist saw his statue of the soul
Was perfect; so, with one regretful stroke,
The earthen model into fragments broke,
And without her the impoverished seasons roll.

HEBE

I saw the twinkle of white feet,
I saw the flash of robes descending;
Before her ran an influence fleet,
That bowed my heart like barley bending.

As, in bare fields, the searching bees
Pilot to blooms beyond our finding,
It led me on, by sweet degrees
Joy's simple honey-cells unbinding.

Those Graces were that seemed grim Fates;
With nearer love the sky leaned o'er me;
The long-sought Secret's golden gates
On musical hinges swung before me.

I saw the brimmed bowl in her grasp
Thrilling with godhood; like a lover
I sprang the proffered life to clasp; —
The beaker fell; the luck was over.

275. The volume containing this poem was reverently dedicated "To the ever fresh and happy memory of our little Blanche."

The Earth has drunk the vintage up;
What boots it patch the goblet's splinters?
Can Summer fill the icy cup,
Whose treacherous crystal is but Winter's?

O spendthrift haste! await the Gods;
Their nectar crowns the lips of Patience;
Haste scatters on unthankful sods
The immortal gift in vain libations.

Coy Hebe flies from those that woo,
And shuns the hands would seize upon her;
Follow thy life, and she will sue
To pour for thee the cup of honor.

THE OAK

WHAT gnarlèd stretch, what depth of shade, is his!
There needs no crown to mark the forest's king;
How in his leaves outshines full summer's bliss!
Sun, storm, rain, dew, to him their tribute bring,
Which he with such benignant royalty
Accepts, as overpayeth what is lent;
All nature seems his vassal proud to be,
And cunning only for his ornament.

How towers he, too, amid the billowed snows,
An unquelled exile from the summer's throne,
Whose plain, uncinctured front more kingly shows,
Now that the obscuring courtier leaves are flown.
His boughs make music of the winter air,
Jewelled with sleet, like some cathedral front
Where clinging snow-flakes with quaint art repair
The dints and furrows of time's envious brunt.

How doth his patient strength the rude March wind
  Persuade to seem glad breaths of summer breeze,
And win the soil that fain would be unkind,
  To swell his revenues with proud increase!
He is the gem; and all the landscape wide
  (So doth his grandeur isolate the sense)
Seems but the setting, worthless all beside,
  An empty socket, were he fallen thence.

So, from oft converse with life's wintry gales,
  Should man learn how to clasp with tougher roots
The inspiring earth; how otherwise avails
  The leaf-creating sap that sunward shoots?
So every year that falls with noiseless flake
  Should fill old scars up on the stormward side,
And make hoar age revered for age's sake,
  Not for traditions of youth's leafy pride.

So, from the pinched soil of a churlish fate,
  True hearts compel the sap of sturdier growth,
So between earth and heaven stand simply great,
  That these shall seem but their attendants both;
For nature's forces with obedient zeal
  Wait on the rooted faith and oaken will:
As quickly the pretender's cheat they feel,
  And turn mad Pucks to flout and mock him still.

Lord! all Thy works are lessons; each contains
  Some emblem of man's all-containing soul;
Shall he make fruitless all Thy glorious pains,
  Delving within Thy grace an eyeless mole?

40. See Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Make me the least of thy Dodona-grove,
Cause me some message of thy truth to bring,
Speak but a word through me, nor let thy love
Among my boughs disdain to perch and sing.

THE HARVARD COMMEMORATION

"The Commemoration services (July 21, 1865) took place in the open air, in the presence of a great assembly. Prominent among the speakers were Major-General Meade, the hero of Gettysburg, and Major-General Devens. The wounds of the war were still fresh and bleeding, and the interest of the occasion was deep and thrilling. The summer afternoon was drawing to its close when the poet began the recital of the ode. No living audience could for the first time follow with intelligent appreciation the delivery of such a poem. To be sure, it had its obvious strong points and its sonorous charms; but, like all the later poems of the author, it is full of condensed thought and requires study. The reader to-day finds many passages whose force and beauty escaped him during the recital, yet the effect of the poem at the time was overpowering. The face of the poet, always singularly expressive, was on this occasion almost transfigured, — glowing, as if with an inward light. It was impossible to look away from it. Our age has furnished many great historic scenes, but this Commemoration combined the elements of grandeur and pathos, and produced an impression as lasting as life. Of the merits of the ode it is perhaps too soon to speak. In nobility of sentiment and sustained power it appears to take rank among the first in the language. To us, with the memories of the war in mind, it seems more beautiful and of a finer quality than the best of Dryden's. What the people of the coming centuries will say, who knows? We only know that the auditors,

45. A grove of oaks at Dodona, in ancient Greece, was the seat of a famous oracle.

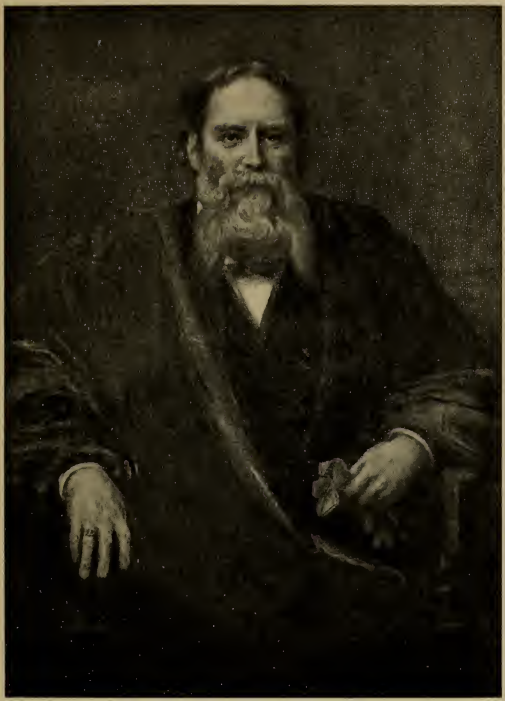
scholars and soldiers alike, were dissolved in admiration and tears." — Underwood's *James Russell Lowell.*

The chapter entitled "Lowell and the War for the Union" in Scudder's *Biography of Lowell* should be read as an introduction to the study of the *Commemoration Ode.* A passage in one of Lowell's letters, 8 December, 1868, reveals the mood in which the poem was written and the intensity of feeling that inspired it. The letter was addressed to the author of a review of the volume of verse which included the ode, and the passage reads as follows: —

"I am not sure if I understand what you say about the tenth strophe. You will observe that it leads naturally to the eleventh, and that I there justify a certain narrowness in it as an expression of the popular feeling as well as my own. I confess I have never got over the feeling of wrath with which (just after the death of my nephew Willie) I read in an English paper that nothing was to be hoped of an army officered by tailor's apprentices and butcher boys. The poem was written with a vehement speed, which I thought I had lost in the skirts of my professor's gown. Till within two days of the celebration I was hopelessly dumb, and then it all came with a rush, literally making me lean (*mi fece magro*), and so nervous that I was weeks in getting over it. I was longer in getting the new (eleventh) strophe to my mind than in writing the rest of my poem. In *that* I hardly changed a word, and it was so undeliberate that I did not find out till after it was printed that some of the verses lacked corresponding rhymes. . . . I had put the ethical and political view so often in prose that I was weary of it. The motives of the war? I had impatiently urged them again and again, — but for an ode they must be in the blood and not the memory."

In 1886, in a letter to R. W. Gilder, Lowell describes the composition of this ode and the effect of the effort upon himself. He says: —

"The passage about Lincoln was not in the ode as originally recited, but added immediately after. More than



LOWELL IN HIS OXFORD GOWN

eighteen months before, however, I had written about Lincoln in the *North American Review* — an article which pleased him. I did divine him earlier than most men of the Brahmin caste. The ode itself was an improvisation. Two days before the Commemoration I had told my friend Child that it was impossible — that I was dull as a doormat. But the next day something gave me a jog and the whole thing came out of me with a rush. I sat up all night writing it out clear, and took it on the morning of the day to Child. 'I have something, but don't yet know what it is, or whether it will do. Look at it and tell me.' He went a little way apart with it under an elm-tree in the college yard. He read a passage here and there, brought it back to me, and said, 'Do? I should think so! Don't you be scared.' And I was n't, but virtue enough had gone out of me to make me weak for a fortnight after. I was amazed at the praises I got. Trevelyan told me afterwards that he never could have carried through the abolition of purchase in the British Army but for the reinforcement he got from that poem."

The study of the versification of *Commemoration Ode* reveals many of Lowell's theories in regard to the adaptation of measures, stanzaic forms, etc., to the spirit of the poem, on the one hand, and on the other to the manner of his presentation. He believed that an author in composing his verses must adapt his measures to recitation, that is to the ear; or to the eye, that is to reading, as the case might be. The Memorial Odes were composed for recitation, and the poet's own words best disclose how this purpose influenced him in the selection and adaptation of conventional verse forms. He writes: —

"The poems [*Three Memorial Poems*] were all intended for public recitation. That was the first thing to be considered. I suppose my ear (from long and painful practice on poems) has more technical practice in this than almost any. The least tedious measure is the rhymed heroic, but this, too, palls unless relieved by passages of wit or even

mere fun. A long series of uniform stanzas (I am always speaking of public recitation) with regularly recurring rhymes produces somnolence among the men and a desperate resort to their fans on the part of the women. No method has yet been invented by which the train of thought or feeling can be shunted off from the epical to the lyrical track. My ears have been jolted often enough over the sleepers on such occasions to know that. I know *something* (of course an American can't know much) about Pindar. But *his* odes had the advantage of being chanted. Now, my problem was to contrive a measure which should not be tedious by uniformity, which should vary with varying moods, in which the transitions (including those of the voice) should be managed without jar. I at first thought of mixed rhymed and blank verses of unequal measures, like those in the choruses of *Samson Agonistes*, which are in the main masterly. Of course, Milton deliberately departed from that stricter form of Greek Chorus to which it was bound quite as much (I suspect) by the law of its musical accompaniment as by any sense of symmetry. I wrote some stanzas of the *Commemoration Ode* on this theory at first, leaving some verses without a rhyme to match. But my ear was better pleased when the rhyme, coming at a longer interval, as a far-off echo rather than instant reverberation, produced the same effect almost, and yet was grateful by unexpectedly recalling an association and faint reminiscence of consonance. I think I have succeeded pretty well, and if you will try reading aloud I believe you would agree with me." For changes and emendations suggested by Lowell but never incorporated in the ode, see *Letters*, ii. 141–143. Another description of this scene will be found in A. V. G. Allen's *Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks*, i. 552. The prayer of Phillips Brooks seemed to those present the great event of the day, the noblest expression of the deep, suppressed emotion that stirred the hearts of all.

ODE RECITED AT THE HARVARD COMMEMORATION

DEDICATED

"To the ever sweet and shining memory of the ninety-three sons of Harvard College who have died for their country in the war of nationality."

I

WEAK-WINGED is song,
Nor aims at that clear-ethered height
Whither the brave deed climbs for light:
We seem to do them wrong,
Bringing our robin's-leaf to deck their hearse
Who in warm life-blood wrote their nobler verse,
Our trivial song to honor those who come
With ears attuned to strenuous trump and drum,
And shaped in squadron-strophes their desire,
Live battle-odes whose lines were steel and fire:
Yet sometimes feathered words are strong,
A gracious memory to buoy up and save
From Lethe's dreamless ooze, the common grave
Of the unventurous throng.

II

To-day our Reverend Mother welcomes back
Her wisest Scholars, those who understood
The deeper teaching of her mystic tome,
And offered their fresh lives to make it good:
No lore of Greece or Rome,
No science peddling with the names of things,
Or reading stars to find inglorious fates,
Can lift our life with wings
Far from Death's idle gulf that for the many waits,
And lengthen out our dates

With that clear fame whose memory sings
In manly hearts to come, and nerves them and dilates:
Nor such thy teaching, Mother of us all!
Not such the trumpet-call
Of thy diviner mood,
That could thy sons entice
From happy homes and toils, the fruitful nest
Of those half-virtues which the world calls best,
Into War's tumult rude;
But rather far that stern device
The sponsors chose that round thy cradle stood
In the dim, unventured wood,
The VERITAS that lurks beneath
The letter's unprolific sheath,
Life of whate'er makes life worth living,
Seed-grain of high emprise, immortal food,
One heavenly thing whereof earth hath the giving.

III

Many loved Truth, and lavished life's best oil
Amid the dust of books to find her,
Content at last, for guerdon of their toil,
With the cast mantle she hath left behind her.
Many in sad faith sought for her,
Many with crossed hands sighed for her:
But these, our brothers, fought for her,
At life's dear peril wrought for her,
So loved her that they died for her,
Tasting the raptured fleetness
Of her divine completeness:

37. An early emblem of Harvard College was a shield with Veritas (truth) upon three open books. This device is still used.

Their higher instinct knew
Those love her best who to themselves are true,
And what they dare to dream of, dare to do;
They followed her and found her
Where all may hope to find,
Not in the ashes of the burnt-out mind,
But beautiful, with danger's sweetness round her.
Where faith made whole with deed
Breathes its awakening breath
Into the lifeless creed,
They saw her plumed and mailed,
With sweet, stern face unveiled,
And all-repaying eyes, look proud on them in death.

IV

Our slender life runs rippling by, and glides
Into the silent hollow of the past;
What is there that abides
To make the next age better for the last?
Is earth too poor to give us
Something to live for here that shall outlive us?
Some more substantial boon
Than such as flows and ebbs with Fortune's fickle moon?
The little that we see
From doubt is never free;
The little that we do
Is but half-nobly true;
With our laborious hiving
What men call treasure, and the gods call dross,
Life seems a jest of Fate's contriving,
Only secure in every one's conniving,
A long account of nothings paid with loss,

Where we poor puppets, jerked by unseen wires,
After our little hour of strut and rave,
With all our pasteboard passions and desires,
Loves, hates, ambitions, and immortal fires,
Are tossed pell-mell together in the grave.
But stay! no age was e'er degenerate,
Unless men held it at too cheap a rate,
For in our likeness still we shape our fate.
Ah, there is something here
Unfathomed by the cynic's sneer,
Something that gives our feeble light
A high immunity from Night,
Something that leaps life's narrow bars
To claim its birthright with the hosts of heaven;
A seed of sunshine that can leaven
Our earthy dulness with the beams of stars,
And glorify our clay
With light from fountains elder than the Day:
A conscience more divine than we,
A gladness fed with secret tears,
A vexing, forward-reaching sense
Of some more noble permanence:
A light across the sea,
Which haunts the soul and will not let it be,
Still glimmering from the heights of undegenerate years.

V

Whither leads the path
To ampler fates that leads?
Not down through flowery meads.
To reap an aftermath
Of youth's vainglorious weeds:
But up the steep, amid the wrath

And shock of deadly hostile creeds,
Where the world's best hope and stay
By battle's flashes gropes a desperate way,
And every turf the fierce foot clings to bleeds.
Peace hath her not ignoble wreath,
Ere yet the sharp, decisive word
Light the black lips of cannon, and the sword
Dreams in its easeful sheath;
But some day the live coal behind the thought,
Whether from Baäl's stone obscene,
Or from the shrine serene
Of God's pure altar brought,
Bursts up in flame; the war of tongue and pen
Learns with what deadly purpose it was fraught,
And, helpless in the fiery passion caught,
Shakes all the pillared state with shock of men:
Some day the soft Ideal that we wooed
Confronts us fiercely, foe-beset, pursued,
And cries reproachful: "Was it, then, my praise,
And not myself was loved? Prove now thy truth;
I claim of thee the promise of thy youth;
Give me thy life, or cower in empty phrase,
The victim of thy genius, not its mate!"
Life may be given in many ways,
And loyalty to Truth be sealed
As bravely in the closet as the field,
So bountiful is Fate;
But then to stand beside her,
When craven churls deride her,
To front a lie in arms and not to yield,
This shows, methinks, God's plan
And measure of a stalwart man,
Limbed like the old heroic breeds,

Who stands self-poised on manhood's solid earth,
Not forced to frame excuses for his birth,
Fed from within with all the strength he needs.

VI

Such was he, our Martyr-Chief,
Whom late the Nation he had led,
With ashes on her head,
Wept with the passion of an angry grief:
Forgive me, if from present things I turn
To speak what in my heart will beat and burn,
And hang my wreath on his world-honored urn.
Nature, they say, doth dote,
And cannot make a man
Save on some worn-out plan,
Repeating us by rote:
For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,
And, choosing sweet clay from the breast
Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.
How beautiful to see
Once more a shepherd of mankind indeed,
Who loved his charge, but never loved to lead;
One whose meek flock the people joyed to be,
Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear-grained human worth,
And brave old wisdom of sincerity!

VI. This stanza was not recited; it was composed immediately after the public delivery of the ode and included in it. It cannot be called an afterthought, for the noble lines express and carry to a climax the intense feeling which animates the entire poem, and in Lowell's own mind was the very soul of the words that fell from his lips.

They knew that outward grace is dust;
They could not choose but trust
In that sure-footed mind's unfaltering skill,
And supple-tempered will
That bent like perfect steel to spring again and thrust.
His was no lonely mountain-peak of mind,
Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
A sea-mark now, now lost in vapors blind;
Broad prairie rather, genial, level-lined,
Fruitful and friendly for all human-kind,
Yet also nigh to heaven and loved of loftiest stars.
Nothing of Europe here,
Or, then, of Europe fronting morn-ward still,
Ere any names of Serf and Peer
Could Nature's equal scheme deface
And thwart her genial will;
Here was a type of the true elder race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to face.
I praise him not; it were too late;
And some innative weakness there must be
In him who condescends to victory
Such as the Present gives, and cannot wait,
Safe in himself as in a fate.
So always firmly he:
He knew to bide his time,
And can his fame abide,
Still patient in his simple faith sublime,
Till the wise years decide.
Great captains, with their guns and drums,
Disturb our judgment for the hour,
But at last silence comes;

These all are gone, and, standing like a tower,
Our children shall behold his fame,
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first American.

VII

Long as man's hope insatiate can discern
Or only guess some more inspiring goal
Outside of Self, enduring as the pole,
Along whose course the flying axles burn
Of spirits bravely-pitched, earth's manlier brood;
Long as below we cannot find
The meed that stills the inexorable mind;
So long this faith to some ideal Good,
Under whatever mortal name it masks,
Freedom, Law, Country, this ethereal mood
That thanks the Fates for their severer tasks,
Feeling its challenged pulses leap,
While others skulk in subterfuges cheap,
And, set in Danger's van, has all the boon it asks,
Shall win man's praise and woman's love,
Shall be a wisdom that we set above
All other skills and gifts to culture dear,
A virtue round whose forehead we enwreathe
Laurels that with a living passion breathe
When other crowns grow, while we twine them, sear.
What brings us thronging these high rites to pay,
And seal these hours the noblest of our year,
Save that our brothers found this better way?

VIII

We sit here in the Promised Land
That flows with Freedom's honey and milk;
But 't was they won it, sword in hand,
Making the nettle danger soft for us as silk.
We welcome back our bravest and our best; —
Ah me! not all! some come not with the rest,
Who went forth brave and bright as any here!
I strive to mix some gladness with my strain,
But the sad strings complain,
And will not please the ear:
I sweep them for a pæan, but they wane
Again and yet again
Into a dirge, and die away in pain.
In these brave ranks I only see the gaps,
Thinking of dear ones whom the dumb turf wraps,
Dark to the triumph which they died to gain:
Fitlier may others greet the living,
For me the past is unforgiving;
I with uncovered head
Salute the sacred dead,
Who went, and who return not. — Say not so!
'T is not the grapes of Canaan that repay,
But the high faith that failed not by the way;

246. "In the privately printed edition of the poem the names of eight of the poet's kindred are given. The nearest in blood are his nephews, General Charles Russell Lowell, killed at Winchester, Lieutenant James Jackson Lowell, at Seven Pines, and Captain William Lowell Putnam, at Ball's Bluff. Another relative was the heroic Colonel Robert G. Shaw, who fell in the assault on Fort Wagner." — Underwood's *James Russell Lowell*.

253 See the *Book of Numbers*, chapter xiii.

Virtue treads paths that end not in the grave;
No bar of endless night exiles the brave;
And to the saner mind
We rather seem the dead that stayed behind.
Blow, trumpets, all your exultations blow!
For never shall their aureoled presence lack:
I see them muster in a gleaming row,
With ever-youthful brows that nobler show;
We find in our dull road their shining track;
In every nobler mood
We feel the orient of their spirit glow,
Part of our life's unalterable good,
Of all our saintlier aspiration;
They come transfigured back,
Secure from change in their high-hearted ways,
Beautiful evermore, and with the rays
Of morn on their white Shields of Expectation!

IX

But is there hope to save
Even this ethereal essence from the grave?
What ever 'scaped Oblivion's subtle wrong
Save a few clarion names, or golden threads of song?
Before my musing eye
The mighty ones of old sweep by,
Disvoiced now and insubstantial things,
As noisy once as we: poor ghosts of kings,
Shadows of empire wholly gone to dust,
And many races, nameless long ago,

255. Compare Gray's line in *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*,

"The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Tennyson uses the same words, but with different and nobler meaning, in his *Ode to the Duke of Wellington*.

To darkness driven by that imperious gust
Of ever-rushing Time that here doth blow:
O visionary world, condition strange,
Where naught abiding is but only Change,
Where the deep-bolted stars themselves still shift and range!
Shall we to more continuance make pretence?
Renown builds tombs; a life-estate is Wit;
And, bit by bit,
The cunning years steal all from us but woe:
Leaves are we, whose decays no harvest sow.
But, when we vanish hence,
Shall they lie forceless in the dark below,
Save to make green their little length of sods,
Or deepen pansies for a year or two,
Who now to us are shining-sweet as gods?
Was dying all they had the skill to do?
That were not fruitless: but the Soul resents
Such short-lived service, as if blind events
Ruled without her, or earth could so endure;
She claims a more divine investiture
Of longer tenure than Fame's airy rents;
Whate'er she touches doth her nature share;
Her inspiration haunts the ennobled air,
Gives eyes to mountains blind,
Ears to the deaf earth, voices to the wind,
And her clear trump sings succor everywhere
By lonely bivouacs to the wakeful mind;
For soul inherits all that soul could dare:
Yea, Manhood hath a wider span
And larger privilege of life than man.
The single deed, the private sacrifice,
So radiant now through proudly-hidden tears,

Is covered up ere long from mortal eyes
With thoughtless drift of the deciduous years;
But that high privilege that makes all men peers,
That leap of heart whereby a people rise
Up to a noble anger's height,
And, flamed on by the Fates, not shrink, but grow more bright,
That swift validity in noble veins,
Of choosing danger and disdaining shame,
Of being set on flame
By the pure fire that flies all contact base,
But wraps its chosen with angelic might,
These are imperishable gains,
Sure as the sun, medicinal as light,
These hold great futures in their lusty reins
And certify to earth a new imperial race.

X

Who now shall sneer?
Who dare again to say we trace
Our lines to a plebeian race?
Roundhead and Cavalier!
Dumb are those names erewhile in battle loud;
Dream-footed as the shadow of a cloud,
They flit across the ear:
That is best blood that hath most iron in 't,
To edge resolve with, pouring without stint
For what makes manhood dear.
Tell us not of Plantagenets,
Hapsburgs, and Guelfs, whose thin bloods crawl
Down from some victor in a border-brawl!
How poor their outworn coronets,

Matched with one leaf of that plain civic wreath
Our brave for honor's blazon shall bequeath,
Through whose desert a rescued Nation sets
Her heel on treason, and the trumpet hears
Shout victory, tingling Europe's sullen ears
With vain resentments and more vain regrets!

XI

Not in anger, not in pride,
Pure from passion's mixture rude,
Ever to base earth allied,
But with far-heard gratitude,
Still with heart and voice renewed,
To heroes living and dear martyrs dead,
The strain should close that consecrates our brave.
Lift the heart and lift the head!
Lofty be its mood and grave,
Not without a martial ring,
Not without a prouder tread
And a peal of exultation:
Little right has he to sing
Through whose heart in such an hour
Beats no march of conscious power,
Sweeps no tumult of elation!
'T is no Man we celebrate,
By his country's victories great,
A hero half, and half the whim of Fate,
But the pith and marrow of a Nation
Drawing force from all her men,
Highest, humblest, weakest, all,
For her time of need, and then
Pulsing it again through them,
Till the basest can no longer cower,

Feeling his soul spring up divinely tall,
Touched but in passing by her mantle-hem.
Come back, then, noble pride, for 't is her dower!
How could poet ever tower,
If his passions, hopes, and fears,
If his triumphs and his tears,
Kept not measure with his people?
Boom, cannon, boom to all the winds and waves!
Clash out, glad bells, from every rocking steeple!
Banners, adance with triumph, bend your staves!
And from every mountain-peak
Let beacon-fire to answering beacon speak,
Katahdin tell Monadnock, Whiteface he,
And so leap on in light from sea to sea,
Till the glad news be sent
Across a kindling continent,
Making earth feel more firm and air breathe braver:
"Be proud! for she is saved, and all have helped to save her!
She that lifts up the manhood of the poor,
She of the open soul and open door,
With room about her hearth for all mankind!
The fire is dreadful in her eyes no more;
From her bold front the helm she doth unbind,
Sends all her handmaid armies back to spin,
And bids her navies, that so lately hurled
Their crashing battle, hold their thunders in,
Swimming like birds of calm along the unharmful shore.
No challenge sends she to the elder world,
That looked askance and hated; a light scorn
Plays o'er her mouth, as round her mighty knees
She calls her children back, and waits the morn
Of nobler day, enthroned between her subject seas."

XII

Bow down, dear Land, for thou hast found release!
Thy God, in these distempered days,
Hath taught thee the sure wisdom of His ways,
And through thine enemies hath wrought thy peace!
Bow down in prayer and praise!
No poorest in thy borders but may now
Lift to the juster skies a man's enfranchised brow,
O Beautiful! my Country! ours once more!
Smoothing thy gold of war-dishevelled hair
O'er such sweet brows as never other wore,
And letting thy set lips,
Freed from wrath's pale eclipse,
The rosy edges of their smile lay bare,
What words divine of lover or of poet
Could tell our love and make thee know it,
Among the Nations bright beyond compare?
What were our lives without thee?
What all our lives to save thee?
We reck not what we gave thee;
We will not dare to doubt thee,
But ask whatever else, and we will dare!

MEMORIÆ POSITUM

R. G. SHAW

I

Beneath the trees,
My lifelong friends in this dear spot,
Sad now for eyes that see them not,
I hear the autumnal breeze
Wake the dry leaves to sigh for gladness gone,
Whispering vague omens of oblivion,
Hear, restless as the seas,
Time's grim feet rustling through the withered grace
Of many a spreading realm and strong-stemmed race,
Even as my own through these.

Why make we moan
For loss that doth enrich us yet
With upward yearnings of regret?
Bleaker than unmossed stone
Our lives were but for this immortal gain
Of unstilled longing and inspiring pain!
As thrills of long-hushed tone
Live in the viol, so our souls grow fine
With keen vibrations from the touch divine
Of noble natures gone.

1. This poem is printed here on account of its relation to the *Commemoration Ode;* see note, p. 57. The same memories inspired the stanza in *Mr. Hosea Biglow's Letter*, etc.

ROBERT GOULD SHAW
WILLIAM LOWELL PUTNAM CHARLES RUSSELL LOWELL
JAMES JACKSON LOWELL

'T were indiscreet
To vex the shy and sacred grief
With harsh obtrusions of relief;
Yet, Verse, with noiseless feet,
Go whisper: "*This* death hath far choicer ends
Than slowly to impearl in hearts of friends;
These obsequies 't is meet
Not to seclude in closets of the heart,
But, church-like, with wide doorways, to impart
Even to the heedless street."

II

Brave, good, and true,
I see him stand before me now,
And read again on that young brow,
Where every hope was new,
How sweet were life! Yet, by the mouth firm-set,
And look made up for Duty's utmost debt,
I could divine he knew
That death within the sulphurous hostile lines,
In the mere wreck of nobly-pitched designs,
Plucks heart's-ease, and not rue.

Happy their end
Who vanish down life's evening stream
Placid as swans that drift in dream
Round the next river-bend!
Happy long life, with honor at the close,
Friends' painless tears, the softened thought of foes!
And yet, like him, to spend
All at a gush, keeping our first faith sure
From mid-life's doubt and eld's contentment poor,
What more could Fortune send?

Right in the van,
On the red rampart's slippery swell,
With heart that beat a charge, he fell
Foeward, as fits a man;
But the high soul burns on to light men's feet
Where death for noble ends makes dying sweet;
His life her crescent's span
Orbs full with share in their undarkening days
Who ever climbed the battailous steeps of praise
Since valor's praise began.

III

His life's expense
Hath won him coeternal youth
With the immaculate prime of Truth;
While we, who make pretence
At living on, and wake and eat and sleep,
And life's stale trick by repetition keep,
Our fickle permanence
(A poor leaf-shadow on a brook, whose play
Of busy idlesse ceases with our day)
Is the mere cheat of sense.

We bide our chance,
Unhappy, and make terms with Fate
A little more to let us wait;
He leads for aye the advance.
Hope's forlorn-hopes that plant the desperate good
For nobler Earths and days of manlier mood:
Our wall of circumstance
Cleared at a bound, he flashes o'er the fight,
A saintly shape of fame, to cheer the right
And steel each wavering glance.

I write of one,
While with dim eyes I think of three;
Who weeps not others fair and brave as he?
Ah, when the fight is won,
Dear Land, whom triflers now make bold to scorn,
(Thee! from whose forehead Earth awaits her morn,)
How nobler shall the sun
Flame in thy sky, how braver breathe thy air,
That thou bred'st children who for thee could dare
And die as thine have done!

MR. HOSEA BIGLOW TO THE EDITOR OF THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

[When the war for the Union broke out, Mr. Lowell contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly* a second series of *Biglow Papers*, and just before the close of the war published the poem that follows.]

Dear Sir, — Your letter come to han'
Requestin' me to please be funny;
But I ain't made upon a plan
Thet knows wut 's comin', gall or honey:
Ther' 's times the world doos look so queer,
Odd fancies come afore I call 'em;
An' then agin, for half a year,
No preacher 'thout a call 's more solemn.

You 're 'n want o' sunthin' light an' cute,
Rattlin' an' shrewd an' kin' o' jingleish,
An' wish, pervidin' it 'ould suit,
I 'd take an' citify my English.

I *ken* write long-tailed, ef I please, —
  But when I 'm jokin', no, I thankee;
Then, 'fore I know it, my idees
  Run helter-skelter into Yankee.

Sence I begun to scribble rhyme,
  I tell ye wut, I hain't ben foolin';
The parson's books, life, death, an' time
  Hev took some trouble with my schoolin';
Nor th' airth don't git put out with me,
  Thet love her 'z though she wuz a woman;
Why, th' ain't a bird upon the tree
  But half forgives my bein' human.

An' yit I love th' unhighschooled way
  Ol' farmers hed when I wuz younger;
Their talk wuz meatier, an' 'ould stay,
  While book-froth seems to whet your hunger;
For puttin' in a downright lick
  'Twixt Humbug's eyes, ther' 's few can metch it,
An' then it helves my thoughts ez slick
  Ez stret-grained hickory doos a hetchet.

But when I can't, I can't, thet 's all,
  For Natur' won't put up with gullin';
Idees you hev to shove an' haul
  Like a druv pig ain't wuth a mullein:
Live thoughts ain't sent for; thru all rifts
  O' sense they pour an' resh ye onwards,
Like rivers when south-lyin' drifts
  Feel thet th' old airth 's a-wheelin' sunwards.

Time wuz, the rhymes come crowdin' thick
  Ez office-seekers arter 'lection,

An' into ary place 'ould stick
Without no bother nor objection;
But sence the war my thoughts hang back
Ez though I wanted to enlist 'em,
An' subs'tutes — *they* don't never lack,
But then they 'll slope afore you 've mist 'em.

Nothin' don't seem like wut it wuz;
I can't see wut there is to hender,
An' yit my brains jes' go buzz, buzz,
Like bumblebees agin a winder;
'Fore these times come, in all airth's row,
Ther' wuz one quiet place, my head in,
Where I could hide an' think, — but now
It 's all one teeter, hopin', dreadin'.

Where 's Peace? I start, some clear-blown night,
When gaunt stone walls grow numb an' number,
An', creakin' 'cross the snow-crus' white,
Walk the col' starlight into summer;
Up grows the moon, an' swell by swell
Thru the pale pasturs silvers dimmer
Than the last smile thet strives to tell
O' love gone heavenward in its shimmer.

I hev ben gladder o' sech things
Than cocks o' spring or bees o' clover,
They filled my heart with livin' springs,
But now they seem to freeze 'em over;
Sights innercent ez babes on knee,
Peaceful ez eyes o' pastur'd cattle,
Jes' coz they be so, seem to me
To rile me more with thoughts o' battle.

In-doors an' out by spells I try;
  Ma'am Natur' keeps her spin-wheel goin',
But leaves my natur' stiff and dry
  Ez fiel's o' clover arter mowin';
An' her jes' keepin' on the same,
  Calmer 'n a clock, an' never carin',
An' findin' nary thing to blame,
  Is wus than ef she took to swearin'.

Snow-flakes come whisperin' on the pane,
  The charm makes blazin' logs so pleasant,
But I can't hark to wut they 're say'n',
  With Grant or Sherman ollers present;
The chimbleys shudder in the gale,
  Thet lulls, then suddin takes to flappin'
Like a shot hawk, but all 's ez stale
  To me ez so much sperit-rappin'.

Under the yaller-pines I house,
  When sunshine makes 'em all sweet-scented,
An' hear among their furry boughs
  The baskin' west-wind purr contented,
While 'way o'erhead, ez sweet an' low
  Ez distant bells thet ring for meetin',
The wedged wil' geese their bugles blow,
  Further an' further South retreatin'.

Or up the slippery knob I strain
  An' see a hundred hills like islan's
Lift their blue woods in broken chain
  Out o' the sea o' snowy silence;
The farm-smokes, sweetes' sight on airth,
  Slow thru the winter air a-shrinkin'

Seem kin' o' sad, an' roun' the hearth
  Of empty places set me thinkin'.

Beaver roars hoarse with meltin' snows,
  An' rattles di'mon's from his granite;
Time wuz, he snatched away my prose,
  An' into psalms or satires ran it;
But he, nor all the rest thet once
  Started my blood to country-dances,
Can't set me goin' more 'n a dunce
  Thet hain't no use for dreams an' fancies.

Rat-tat-tat-tattle thru the street
  I hear the drummers makin' riot,
An' I set thinkin' o' the feet
  Thet follered once an' now are quiet, —
White feet ez snowdrops innercent,
  Thet never knowed the paths o' Satan,
Whose comin' step ther' 's ears thet won't,
  No, not lifelong, leave off awaitin'.

Why, hain't I held 'em on my knee?
  Did n't I love to see 'em growin',
Three likely lads ez wal could be,
  Hahnsome an' brave an' not tu knowin'?
I set an' look into the blaze
  Whose natur', jes' like theirn, keeps climbin',
Ez long 'z it lives, in shinin' ways,
  An' half despise myself for rhymin'.

Wut 's words to them whose faith an' truth
  On War's red techstone rang true metal,

105 Beaver Brook, a tributary of the Charles.

Who ventered life an' love an' youth
For the gret prize o' death in battle?
To him who, deadly hurt, agen
Flashed on afore the charge's thunder,
Tippin' with fire the bolt of men
Thet rived the Rebel line asunder?

'T ain't right to hev the young go fust,
All throbbin' full o' gifts an' graces,
Leavin' life's paupers dry ez dust
To try an' make b'lieve fill their places:
Nothin' but tells us wut we miss,
Ther' 's gaps our lives can't never fay in,
An' *thet* world seems so fur from this
Lef' for us loafers to grow gray in!

My eyes cloud up for rain; my mouth
Will take to twitchin' roun' the corners;
I pity mothers, tu, down South,
For all they sot among the scorners:
I 'd sooner take my chance to stan'
At Jedgment where your meanest slave is,
Than at God's bar hol' up a han'
Ez drippin' red ez yourn, Jeff Davis!

Come, Peace! not like a mourner bowed
For honor lost an' dear ones wasted,
But proud, to meet a people proud,
With eyes thet tell o' triumph tasted!
Come, with han' grippin' on the hilt,
An' step thet proves ye Victory's daughter!
Longin' for you, our sperits wilt
Like shipwrecked men's on raf's for water.

Come, while our country feels the lift
Of a gret instinct shoutin' "Forwards!"
An' knows thet freedom ain't a gift
Thet tarries long in han's o' cowards!
Come, sech ez mothers prayed for, when
They kissed their cross with lips thet quivered,
An' bring fair wages for brave men,
A nation saved, a race delivered!

THE FIRST SNOW-FALL

[In a letter to Sydney H. Gay, dated Elmwood, December 22, 1849, Lowell wrote: "Print *that* as if you loved it. Let not a comma be blundered. Especially I fear they will put '*gleaming*' for '*gloaming*' in the first line unless you look to it. May you not have the key which shall unlock the whole meaning of the poem to you!"]

THE snow had begun in the gloaming,
And busily all the night
Had been heaping field and highway
With a silence deep and white.

Every pine and fir and hemlock
Wore ermine too dear for an earl,
And the poorest twig on the elm-tree
Was ridged inch-deep with pearl.

From sheds new-roofed with Carrara
Came Chanticleer's muffled crow,
The stiff rails were softened to swan's-down,
And still fluttered down the snow.

9. The marble of Carrara, Italy, is noted for its purity.

I stood and watched by the window
The noiseless work of the sky,
And the sudden flurries of snow-birds,
Like brown leaves whirling by.

I thought of a mound in sweet Auburn
Where a little headstone stood;
How the flakes were folding it gently,
As did robins the babes in the wood.

Up spoke our own little Mabel,
Saying, "Father, who makes it snow?"
And I told of the good All-father
Who cares for us here below.

Again I looked at the snow-fall,
And thought of the leaden sky
That arched o'er our first great sorrow,
When that mound was heaped so high.

I remembered the gradual patience
That fell from that cloud like snow,
Flake by flake, healing and hiding
The scar of our deep-plunged woe.

And again to the child I whispered,
"The snow that husheth all,
Darling, the merciful Father
Alone can make it fall!"

Then, with eyes that saw not, I kissed her;
And she, kissing back, could not know
That *my* kiss was given to her sister,
Folded close under deepening snow.

THE CHANGELING

I HAD a little daughter,
And she was given to me
To lead me gently backward
To the Heavenly Father's knee,
That I, by the force of nature,
Might in some dim wise divine
The depth of his infinite patience
To this wayward soul of mine.

I know not how others saw her,
But to me she was wholly fair,
And the light of the heaven she came from
Still lingered and gleamed in her hair;
For it was as wavy and golden,
And as many changes took,
As the shadows of sun-gilt ripples
On the yellow bed of a brook.

To what can I liken her smiling
Upon me, her kneeling lover,
How it leaped from her lips to her eyelids,
And dimpled her wholly over,
Till her outstretched hands smiled also,
And I almost seemed to see
The very heart of her mother
Sending sun through her veins to me!

She had been with us scarce a twelve-month,
And it hardly seemed a day,

When a troop of wandering angels
Stole my little daughter away;
Or perhaps those heavenly Zingari
But loosed the hampering strings,
And when they had opened her cage-door,
My little bird used her wings.

But they left in her stead a changeling,
A little angel child,
That seems like her bud in full blossom,
And smiles as she never smiled:
When I wake in the morning, I see it
Where she always used to lie,
And I feel as weak as a violet
Alone 'neath the awful sky.

As weak, yet as trustful also;
For the whole year long I see
All the wonders of faithful Nature
Still worked for the love of me;
Winds wander, and dews drip earthward,
Rain falls, suns rise and set,
Earth whirls, and all but to prosper
A poor little violet.

This child is not mine as the first was,
I cannot sing it to rest,
I cannot lift it up fatherly
And bliss it upon my breast:
Yet it lies in my little one's cradle
And sits in my little one's chair,
And the light of the heaven she's gone to
Transfigures its golden hair.

THE FOOT-PATH

It mounts athwart the windy hill
  Through sallow slopes of upland bare,
And Fancy climbs with foot-fall still
  Its narrowing curves that end in air.

By day, a warmer-hearted blue
  Stoops softly to that topmost swell;
Its thread-like windings seem a clue
  To gracious climes where all is well.

By night, far yonder, I surmise
  An ampler world than clips my ken,
Where the great stars of happier skies
  Commingle nobler fates of men.

I look and long, then haste me home,
  Still master of my secret rare;
Once tried, the path would end in Rome,
  But now it leads me everywhere.

Forever to the new it guides,
  From former good, old overmuch;
What Nature for her poets hides,
  'T is wiser to divine than clutch.

The bird I list hath never come
  Within the scope of mortal ear;
My prying step would make him dumb,
  And the fair tree, his shelter, sear.

Behind the hill, behind the sky,
  Behind my inmost thought, he sings;
No feet avail; to hear it nigh,
  The song itself must lend the wings.

Sing on, sweet bird, close hid, and raise
  Those angel stairways in my brain,
That climb from these low-vaulted days
  To spacious sunshines far from pain.

Sing when thou wilt, enchantment fleet,
  I leave thy covert haunt untrod,
And envy Science not her feat
  To make a twice-told tale of God.

ALADDIN

When I was a beggarly boy,
  And lived in a cellar damp,
I had not a friend nor a toy,
  But I had Aladdin's lamp;
When I could not sleep for the cold,
  I had fire enough in my brain,
And builded, with roofs of gold,
  My beautiful castles in Spain!

Since then I have toiled day and night,
  I have money and power good store,
But I 'd give all my lamps of silver bright
  For the one that is mine no more:
Take, Fortune, whatever you choose,
  You gave, and may snatch again;
I have nothing 't would pain me to lose,
  For I own no more castles in Spain!

AIDS TO THE STUDY OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

BY H. A. DAVIDSON

THE STUDY OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

LOWELL'S interpretation of the poet's mission is given in his own words in a letter to his friend, C. F. Briggs, dated February 18, 1846. He writes, . . . "my calling is clear to me. I am never lifted up to any peak of vision — and moments of almost fearful inward illumination I have sometimes — but that when I look down in hope to see some valley of the Beautiful Mountains, I behold nothing but blackened ruins; and the moans of the downtrodden the world over — but chiefly here in our own land — come up to my ear, instead of the happy songs of the husbandmen reaping and binding the sheaves of light; yet these, too, I hear not seldom. Then I feel how great is the office of poet, could I but even dare to hope to fill it. Then it seems as if my heart would break in pouring out one glorious song that should be the gospel of Reform, full of consolation and strength to the oppressed, yet falling gently and restoringly as dew on the withered youth-flowers of the oppressor. That way my madness lies, if any."

The same conception of the poet's high mission as a leader of reform finds expression in many of Lowell's early poems, especially those in a small volume entitled *A Year's Life*, —

> "Never had poets such high call before,
> Never can poets hope for higher one,
> . . . . . .
> For he who settles Freedom's principles
> Writes the death-warrant of all tyranny;
> Who speaks the truth stabs Falsehood to the heart."
>
> From *L'Envoi.*

But the true inspiration of *The Vision of Sir Launfal* must be sought in Lowell's relation to the anti-slavery cause in its birth hour. With the enthusiasm of early love and superabundant vitality, the young poet entered the lists as the champion of the downtrodden and the oppressed. The movement led by Garrison and Phillips and a score of devoted men was to him none other than a holy crusade. He bewailed the necessity which compelled him to receive money for the contributions of his pen; in his own thought, his words were the expression of burning conviction, poured forth in behalf of fellow beings — even the lowliest and most oppressed.

It is significant that twice in Lowell's life the composition of great poems at fever heat, in an incredibly short space of time, followed many months of polemical writing in prose on the same subject. It would seem as if the man had sweated over his ideas and wrought them into phrases apt to express his meaning until, in his own words, they passed from his memory into the blood, when suddenly the poet's brain took fire, and transmuted into song the deep conviction and the heartfelt emotion of the philanthropist. In the year preceding the composition of the *Commemoration Ode*, in January, July, and October, the *North American Review* contained political articles from his pen, dealing with the issues involved in Mr. Lincoln's candidacy for reëlection. Of this and other poems belonging in the same group he writes, "My blood was up and you would hardly believe me if I were to tell how few hours intervened between conception and completion, even in so long a one as *Mason and Slidell*. So I have a kind of faith that the 'Ode' is right because it was *there*. I hardly knew how. . . . I had put the ethical and political view so often in prose that I was weary of it. The motives of the war? I had impatiently argued them again and again — but for an ode they must be in the blood, not in the memory."

Once before, in Lowell's life, a period of hot partisanship and polemical argument had been followed by the conception

and swift composition of a beautiful poem, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, in which the poet's zeal for the anti-slavery cause found expression. From the beginning, Lowell had conceived of the attempt to root slavery out of the land of the free as a holy crusade; and when, in 1846, he became a regular contributor to *The Standard*, the organ of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he entered on his task as on a holy warfare. He insisted on the privilege of sending contributions either in prose or in verse, as the humor seized him or the muse inspired. During the time that Lowell wrote for this periodical — about four years — his pen was the servant of an almost chivalrous loyalty and devotion to the cause he and his wife had espoused. In different form, prose and poetry alike breathed the same urgent message; when the poet's imagination took fire and he sought a theme for a longer poem than he had yet written, the form of a parable came to his mind, in which the leper at the gate, gruesome, repulsive, and rejected, was no other than the black slave.

Two groups of poems hold an intimate relation to *The Vision of Sir Launfal* and serve to interpret the hidden meaning of the legend. In one of these groups are other poems, written in this period of Lowell's life in the mood that inspired *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. The most significant of these will be found in Group A, pages 16–33. The story of Sir Launfal's adventure is, in truth, the parable of a holy crusade; the knight going forth in search of the Grail reaches his goal, not in the land where Christ was buried, but at the very door of his own castle in the North Countree, when he shared his crust with the loathsome, gruesome thing he saw at his side, and the revealing light fell clear around him. *The Search* (February, 1847) is almost a parallel, a commentary, for *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, the futile search for Christ ending in a "hovel rude" where

> "The King I sought for meekly stood;
> A naked, hungry child
> Clung round his gracious knee,

And a poor hunted slave looked up and smiled,
To bless the smile that set him free."

This is the leper by Sir Launfal's gate in the North Countree.

In *A Parable* (May, 1848), said Christ our Lord, —

"Have ye founded your thrones and altars, then,
On the bodies and souls of living men?
And think ye that building shall endure,
Which shelters the noble and crushes the poor?"
. . . . . .
. . . "Lo, here," said he,
The images ye have made of me."

And Christ set in the midst of those who named his name, the poet says, creatures so low and degraded that the hem of the garment was drawn back lest it should be defiled.

In *Bibliolatres* (May, 1849), Lowell cried out in passionate impatience with men who worship "light ancestral" and at the same time turn deaf ears to the moaning of the oppressed: —

"What art thou, own brother of the clod,[1]
Bowing thyself in dust before a Book,
And thinking the great God is thine alone?
God is not dumb that He should speak no more;
If thou hast wanderings in the wilderness
And find'st not Sinai, 't is thy soul is poor;
There towers the mountain of the Voice no less,
Which whoso seeks shall find." . . .

Here, also, we find the mountain that strives with the faint-hearted, the Sinai that we daily climb, not heeding, in

. . . "mountain organ-tones
By prophet ears from Hor and Sinai caught." . . .

A sentence in a letter written by Lowell in September, 1848, suggests the typical significance, in his mind, of the mountain in the wilderness, Sinai: — "We may reach our Promised Land; but it is far behind us in the Wilderness, in the early time of struggle, that we have left our Sinais and our personal talk with God in the bush."

[1] The order of the lines in the poem has not been preserved here.

In *Freedom* (June, 1848), "the great winds utter prophecies," —

> "Are we, then, wholly fallen? Can it be
> That thou, North wind, that from thy mountains bringest,
> Their spirit to our plains, and thou, blue sea,
> Who on our rocks thy wreaths of freedom flingest,
> As on an altar, — can it be that ye
> Have wasted inspiration on dead ears,
> Dulled with the too familiar clank of chains?"

"Fallen and traitor lives" characterize those descendants of the men that came in the "hero-freighted Mayflower" who shrink back, fleeing God's express design. The beautiful figure of Freedom fleeing morn-ward with light footsteps, gone before the day has risen, is lost in the strenuous urgency of the moralist.

The Present Crisis (December, 1845), that noblest of all Lowell's poems, is the epitome of the very spirit of our Pilgrim forefathers, at the same time great, and narrow, and prophetic of the future. In words thrilling with passionate conviction and enkindled with imagination, the poet lifts the strife of his own time into the plain of world history, and it becomes infinitely great because it marks one step in the advance of the human race.

> "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
> In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;
> Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
> . . . . . .
> And these mounts of anguish number how each generation learned
> One new word of that grand *Credo* which in prophet-hearts hath burned
> Since the first man stood God-conquered with his face to heaven upturned."

Careful study of Lowell's prose in the files of *The Standard*, in connection with poems written approximately at the same time, would reveal a close parallel, also, between the expression of conviction in the form of argument and the embodiment in verse of enthusiasm and emotion arising from

conviction; but this is a subject inviting to the critical reader rather than a task for the school room.

But were the expression of conviction, the hidden meaning of the parable, the only purpose dear to the poet's heart in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, it would not be the noble poem it is. Deep conviction may be the soul of the beautiful work of art in any medium, be it language, or marble, or color, or sound, but it cannot of itself become the essential characteristic of the art form chosen as the means of expression. There must be some imaginative organization of thought to make it a fit subject for a work of art, and the form chosen must be adorned and enriched, as the artist is able, by every means suited to his need which tradition and usage have sanctioned as forms of expression for artistic truth or beauty. *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, serving as an expression of Lowell's belief in the obligation of human being to fellow human being, is nevertheless, intimately, the overflowing of a poet's heart full of the love of nature and the mood of youth. On this side, *The Vision of Sir Launfal* may be studied best in connection with another group of poems belonging also to the same period of early manhood and happiness as the prose and the longer poem. It is especially to note the poet's fondness for the high-tide of the year in June that a number of these poems (Group B, pages 34–88) are included in this volume and referred to here. The material of his observation is essentially the same in the several poems, and the reader feels the note of genuine experience and emotion in the spontaneous, untroubled repetition from various points of view.

Beaver Brook (*The Mill*, January, 1849) is the brook of the second prelude in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, and in the poem Lowell expresses again the belief which is the keynote of his improvisation in *A Day in June*, that "Beauty underlies forevermore each form of use." *Al Fresco* is full of haunting echoes of descriptions of nature in older verse which had enriched the poet's brain: the "hermit thrush," the "buccaneering bee," the "nunnery of the lily," and,

more than all, the subtler reference to the thought pervading Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*, in

"To-day I will be a boy again,"

and to his own first prelude in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, in

"What gospels lost the woods retrieve."

The first paragraphs of *Under the Willows* read like another version of "And what is so rare as a day in June."

"June is the pearl of our New England year."
"June! Dear June! Now God be praised for June."

The description of the coming of spring in *Sunthin' in the Pastoral Line*, of the waking up of "Northun natur', slow and apt to doubt," is a close parallel in selection, even in phrase, to the descriptions of the same time of year in *Under the Willows* and in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. "The robin is plastering his house hard by," in one poem; in the other, when "the gray hossches'nuts leetle hands unfold, the robin-redbreast, mindful of his 'almanick,' goes to plast'rin his adobë house." The identity in mood and in detail of observation is no less marked that in one, the hang-bird flashes; in another the bobolink, the soul of the sweet season, swings. In each poem Lowell varies his choice of phrase or illustration to suit the point of view chosen and the purpose in mind, but the rhythmic pulse attuning the heart of the poet to "the natural way of living" is always the same.

These poems illustrate, also, Lowell's fondness for his own phrases and conceits, and show the frequency with which he repeats himself; perchance, as well, the reason why he so often found the poetic muse "Invita Minerva." In *Beaver Brook* "Warm noon brims full the valley's cup;" in *An Indian-Summer Reverie* "Hebe Autumn fills the bowl between me and those distant hills;" and in *Al Fresco* "The rich, milk-tingeing buttercup Its tiny polished urn holds up, Filled with ripe summer to the edge."

In *Under the Willows*, the poet says, "What a day to sun me and do nothing;" in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, "We sit in the warm shade and feel how the sap creeps up;"

and Hosea Biglow in the spring "allus feels the sap start in his veins."

The poet's first love is always given to the bobolink. Hosea Biglow writes,

> . . . "June's bridesman, poet o' the year,
> Gladness on wings, the bobolink, is here;
> Half-hid in tip-top apple-blooms he swings,
> Or climbs aginst the breeze with quiverin' wings."

In the coming of spring among the willows, the swallow and the bluebird are no more than forerunners for the true poet of song.

> "But now, oh rapture! sunshine winged and voiced,
> . . . . . .
> Gladness of woods, skies, waters, all in one,
> The bobolink has come, and, like the soul
> Of the sweet season vocal in a bird,
> Gurgles in ecstasy we know not what." . . .

There is no space here for tracing further Lowell's habit of repeating forms of expression in different poems for similar ideas, and of using over conceits adapted now to one poetic or imaginative point of view, now to another. The illustrations that have been given are no more than suggestions for wider reading and comparison such as any pupil fond of poetry may carry out.

Lowell calls all his war poems improvisations. This seems to be his own characterization of the moment of creation which combined in imaginative unity material long familiar to his thought in other form. In *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, he chose to make improvisation personified in the musing organist building "a bridge from Dreamland for his lay" the mould of form for the poem. Thus the main theme is expressed in a narrative held within another narrative form so slight that it slips away from the reader completely as he goes on. When the opening of Part Second appears the word "Prelude" recalls him, but seems scarcely justified. In *The Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge has employed the same literary device, but with infinitely greater skill. Now and again, the wedding guest, an enforced lis-

tener, is brought to the reader's attention, and so perfect is this narrative form, which serves as setting for the tale the mariner tells, that the critic may note each typical step of progress from beginning to moment of climax and conclusion, clearly marked but distinct from the narrative art of the tale itself, which has also its own complete, well-arranged sequence and organization as plot.

In *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, the figure of improvisation is shown first in the gradual approach of the poet to the subject of his narrative. True, he begins with a generalized statement of his theme, — "We Sinais climb and know it not," but this is introduced in the form of a protest. It is not true, as Wordsworth intimates, that heaven recedes from the growing boy as he leaves infancy far behind. Few readers perceive — striving to catch the somewhat obscure meaning — the significance of these words as the announcement, remote and far away, of the real theme of the poem. Then the poet passes on to specify the influences in all nature, animate and inanimate, which strive with the heart of man that he may be led from the wilderness to the mountain heights where the soul talks face to face, as Moses of old, with God. It is but a step from description of these divine influences, manifest in the beauty and teeming life of June, to their effect on the hearts of men, — which at last brings the improvisator to the goal he had in mind from the first, the beginning of his narrative. Then the generalization is dropped in a moment, and henceforth an illustration, in the single instance, of the great truth he has tried to phrase, is substituted. We follow in concrete example the story of how nature and his own heart and many varied experiences compelled one man along the upward way, until, after a weary interval, the light shone around him and he lifted his downward gaze to discover that, unwittingly, he had climbed his Sinai and found the Lord.

Lowell marks the thematic improvisation threading his poem by prolonging the influence of springtime and June into the dream. The June day, introduced first as a mani-

festation of the divinity that dwells in all nature and finds expression in beauty and life, becomes then the influence that moved the knight to the keeping of his vow, and lingered in his memory as he lay on the rushes in his own courtyard. When he fell asleep, the little birds of spring sang on in his dream, and it was, in his vision, as in reality, the one perfect day of all the year. Thus has the poet, advancing, retreating, illustrating, built a bridge, not from, but into, Dreamland, for his lay. The picture of summer in siege around the dark castle, representative of the man's heart before the call to remember his vow came to him, repeats in variation, mingling with the thread of the narrative, the description of the June day, and suggests the *motive* insistently, so that it remains in the mind, as in music the theme holds the ear and is the compelling or dominant note.

The Prelude to Part Second of *The Vision of Sir Launfal* seems to be an attempt to return to the point of view of the improvisator and to create an artistic parallel to the first prelude. Beautiful as are the lines descriptive of the descent of winter from the mountain and the housing of the little brook in his palace of ice, they nevertheless fail of the artistic purpose which the poet designed them to fulfil in his plan. The reasons for this failure must be indicated with the utmost brevity. The attempt to lead the imagination outside of the dream, to the point of view of the improvisator, is unsuccessful, because the moment the reader pictures Sir Launfal sitting at his own gate, cold and shelterless, the parts of the scene are inevitably reversed, and the preceding description of winter and storm becomes no more than the setting of the picture, subordinate to the figure of the old man. In the Prelude to Part First this reversal of parts when the element of human interest enters does not occur, for two reasons; first, the description leads up to the narrative and serves as a means of introduction, and, secondly, the motive which is the beginning of the slight plot, the stirring of purpose in the heart of the knight, is supplied by this means. In Part Second the narrative is under way,

the imagination of the reader is fully committed to it, and there has been no reminder that the action of the story has reality only in the visions of the sleeping knight. The description, further, supplies no motive for the incidents that follow. The attempt to build out of it a contrast in the manner of the earlier figure is not convincing for lack of intimate correspondence between the figure and the meaning. The winter palace in no way typifies or motives the spiritual experience of the returning knight; the contrast between the frost and cold without the castle and the cheering glow of warmth from within seems superficial and unreal, since the life and light of a new spiritual purpose are in the heart of the man on the outside and must enter with him when at last the siege of summer is over.

For similar reasons, the awakening of Sir Launfal at the end fails to quicken the imagination. The narrator has done his work too well. Readers have followed the progress of the tale with such belief in the reality of the passage of time that the mind refuses to turn back or to exchange the thin figure of the old man for the youthful knight who rode forth in the morning. The effort is made difficult by a belief rooted in the minds of us all that such charity and humility as Sir Launfal showed when for the second time he met the leper, arise in proud hearts only after long and bitter experience. The very wording of the conclusion, "The Summer's long siege at last is o'er," lends itself to the persuasion of the mind that the experience of Sir Launfal was a real one, and the result, namely that mingling of new-born purpose and sympathy which ripens only in the flight of years, adds conviction.

In passing, we should note that one element of an ideally arranged narrative is entirely lacking in the story of the poem. Lowell gives his tale a definite beginning and motives sufficiently the going forth of the knight, but he does not indicate, even by remote suggestion, the experiences that changed his spirit and sent him back the humble servant of the lowliest human need. The reminiscent memory of the

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old man and the contrast between his earlier and later self go far to supply the omission, and doubtless the difficulty of rounding the narrative without lessening the force of the truth the poet would convey was too great. *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is so full of beauty in all its parts, and so derived from the very sun and wind and bloom of our own land, so instinct with the history and spirit of a young nation, that we all must love it and cherish it in the memory, not in the spirit of criticism, but as a choice inheritance.

A FEW REFERENCES FOR THE STUDY OF LOWELL'S LIFE AND WORKS

James Russell Lowell, a Biography by H. E. Scudder. In volume i, chapters i–iv are especially important in the study of The Vision of Sir Launfal. In chapter iv are many quotations which interpret the meaning of phrases in the poem.

Letters of James Russell Lowell, edited by C. E. Norton.

James Russell Lowell, by F. H. Underwood.

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Cambridge Thirty Years Ago, by J. R. Lowell.

In Riverside Edition of Lowell's Prose Works, vol. i;

In Fireside Travels:

In My Garden Acquaintance, and other essays.

Cheerful Yesterdays, by T. W. Higginson.

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A Literary History of America, by Barrett Wendell.
Poets' Homes, by R. H. Stoddard.
A Reader's History of American Literature, by T. W. Higginson and H. W. Boynton.
James Russell Lowell, in American Men of Letters Series, by Ferris Greenslet (*in preparation*).

THE INDEBTEDNESS OF THE AUTHOR OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL TO OTHER WRITERS.

The following note accompanied the first publication of *The Vision of Sir Launfal* in 1848, and was retained by Lowell in all subsequent editions: —

"According to the mythology of the Romancers, the San Greal, or Holy Grail, was the cup out of which Jesus Christ partook of the last supper with his disciples. It was brought into England by Joseph of Arimathea, and remained there, an object of pilgrimage and adoration, for many years in the keeping of his lineal descendants. It was incumbent upon those who had charge of it to be chaste in thought, word, and deed; but, one of the keepers having broken this condition, the Holy Grail disappeared. From that time it was a favorite enterprise of the Knights of Arthur's court to go in search of it. Sir Galahad was at last successful in finding it, as may be read in the seventeenth book of the Romance of King Arthur. Tennyson has made Sir Galahad the subject of one of the most exquisite of his poems.

"The plot (if I may give that name to anything so slight) of the following poem is my own, and, to serve its purposes, I have enlarged the circle of competition in search of the miraculous cup in such a manner as to include not only other persons than the heroes of the Round Table, but also a period of time subsequent to the date of King Arthur's reign."

For the Legend. Lowell's indebtedness to old tales of quests for the Holy Grail was general and indefinite. He drew from mediæval literature, with which he was intimately acquainted, a typical outline for the narrative of his own invention, and the traditions that have made the search for the Grail a symbol of consecration to some noble end enabled him to embody a hidden ethical purpose in his tale. The name of his knight appears in one form and another in the romances of the Middle Ages. This form of it is most commonly associated with the metrical romance entitled *Launfal*, by Sir Thomas Chestre, published in the reign of Henry VI, and now to be found in volume i of Ritson's *Ancient English Metrical Romances*. The tale is a free and enlarged version of some French romance, and it relates amorous adventures of the knight Sir Launfal, or Lancelot, in another spelling, in which King Arthur and Queen Guinevere appear. From it Lowell borrowed no more than the name.

For poetic figures and conceits. The poet's indebtedness to Wordsworth and to Cowper is far greater. Each of these poets touched his imagination, and he re-minted in poetic fervor the figures and fancies of their poems, but no idea or vision came from him unchanged. The indebtedness is in that subtle form to be traced only through the creative imagination. His brain reproduced in form of vision idyllic pictures corresponding to the words he read. The phrases slipped away, but the creations called up by them remained a possession of his mind, and stimulated activity of the same kind. With true poetic instinct, he transmuted each fancy into the scenes and the detail of nature familiar by observation. If one reads the earlier poems of these authors and, immediately after, Lowell's preludes, there comes to the critical sense a strong impression of greater condensation, closer organization of material, and lighter, freer handling of phrase and fancy in the work of the American poet. Thus he made good his own words, "'T is his at last who has said it best."

The source of the inspiration of the Prelude to Part First, both in rich detail and in deeper meaning, cannot be mistaken. Suggestions for comparison of this prelude with Wordsworth's Ode will be found elsewhere. In Cowper's *The Task*, Book V, "The Winter Morning Walk," lines 97–176, are descriptions that suggest the very figures and fancies of the Prelude to Part Second. The quotation of a few lines will illustrate, and also suggest comparison at greater length: —

> . . . "On the flood,
> Indurated and fixed, the snowy weight
> Lies undissolved; while silently beneath,
> And unperceived, the current steals away.
> . . . . . .
> And see where it has hung the embroidered banks
> With forms so various, that no powers of art,
> The pencil or the pen, may trace the scene;
> Here glittering turrets rise, uprearing high
> (Fantastic misarrangement!) on the roof
> Large growth of what may seem the sparkling trees
> And shrubs of fairy land. The crystal drops
> That trickle down the branches, fast congealed,
> Shoot into pillars of pellucid length,
> And prop the pile they but adorned before."

Here, perhaps, is the suggestion of Lowell's **steel-stemmed trees.**

TOPICS FOR STUDY

PRELUDE TO PART FIRST

1. In what is the key to the artistic presentation of the Prelude?
2. What is the plan of the Prelude?
3. **Builds a bridge from Dreamland for his lay** is a figure of speech in which the poet wishes each one of us to recognize a parallel between something that takes place in the mind of the organist seated at his instrument and the real act of the figure. Find as many parts of the parallel as you can. Do you notice any respect in which the parallel is not a good one?

4. **Nearer draws his theme.** What did the poet mean by **his theme**, — the story, or the purpose in the story, or something else? What is the meaning of **nearer draws**, here?
5. What is the thought in the mind of the poet which is illustrated by the figure **faint auroral flushes**?

NOTE. — In answer, describe faint auroral flushes, or flashes, as seen in the sky; then describe the process in the mind indicated by the words **theme draws nearer**. Finally, point out any resemblances between the two which make the figure a fit one for the poet's use.

6. What did Wordsworth mean when he said that heaven is especially about the soul of the young child?

In lines 11 and 12, Lowell means that older persons, year by year, come nearer to heaven in another way; if you would understand these lines and their relation to the story that follows, answer the following questions carefully, in order:

a. Where is Mount Sinai, geographically?

b. How long ago did the incident in the history of the Jews to which Lowell refers take place?

c. For what did the leader of the tribes go up into the mountain? Why did he go alone?

NOTE. — See page 89 for Lowell's figurative use of the mountain in other poems.

d. Why was this incident important in the life of the Jewish nation?

e. How many reasons can you find for describing the process by which any one becomes daily better and more noble as climbing Sinai?

f. What did Lowell mean when he said we climb our Sinais with **souls that cringe and plot**?

7. In the third paragraph, Lowell describes in a poetic way five influences which seem to plead with every one who feels them to live more nearly in accord with his highest ideals. Name and describe in plain English words these influences. Are they different influences, or different forms of the same influence?
8. Explain especially the meaning in:

a. **Our fallen and traitor lives.**

NOTE. — For one explanation, see Lowell's poem *Freedom*.

b. **prophecies,** uttered by great winds?

9. Why did the poet call men faint-hearted? What did he mean by the striving of the mountain with the faint heart?
10. Can you show whether **Druid** is a fit adjective for woods? For what special reason did Lowell choose it here? For the use of this word in other poetry, see p. 2.
11. What is the dictionary meaning of the Latin word **benedicite**? What part of the church service does it suggest?
12. If this figure, in lines 17, 18, is borrowed from the church service, can you explain the four parts, the waiting wood, the outstretched arms, the benedicite, the worshippers?
13. Can you explain the parallel between the figure and the meaning in lines 19, 20, in the same way?
14. **Earth gets its price for what earth gives us** is a general statement which Lowell illustrates by particulars. Name in order the illustrations he chooses and for each ask:

    a. What the words mean literally.

    b. Whether the statement is true in life as you know it; give illustrations of your own, if you can.

NOTE. — Earth is a figure by which one thing is used for another entirely different because it suggests the idea, or has come by common consent to stand for it. The personification of Earth is an aid in conveying this transferred meaning, and this figure is carried out in the conceit of bargain and price paid. Other expressions, **the Devil's dross, a cap and bells**, etc., must be understood in the same figurative way.

15. Lines 29–32 are arranged in contrast with lines 21–28, at every point. In these lines,

    a. Underline every phrase which seems to you hard to understand; as, **ounce of dross, Devil's booth**, etc.

    b. Think what meaning each phrase has in your own mind, and write an explanation of it with illustration, as you would for a friend who could see no meaning in the poetic language used.

    c. Find as many points of contrast between lines 29–32 and lines 21–28 as you can.
16. What connection have these lines with the beginning of Prelude to Part First, lines 1–12?
17. **A Day in June.** How is this beautiful description of a day in June prepared for and introduced in the preceding stanza?

18. Why was Lowell unwilling to pass at once from his prelude to his narrative?
19. Show the plan or organization of this description by lines, and also how the poet leads the reader easily from one division to the next.

NOTE. — Lowell leads readers to the acceptance of the point of view he desires in this prelude by many steps of transition. In a large way, the poetic paragraphs divide in meaning into three parts. In the first, the poet narrates with genuine feeling how with the turn of the year and the strengthening warmth of the sun, life, like a high tide, floods the old channels, stirring first in the clod, then climbing and spreading until the wide view palpitates and thrills. Then, by the easiest transition, he tells how the new life of springtime affects all the happy creatures of the world out of doors. Then, again, by the figure of the tide flooding back **into every bare inlet, and creek, and bay**, he leads our thought to the influence of the season on the emotions and feelings of the human heart. He dwells in detail upon the multitudinous ways in which human beings respond to the quickening of life and activity in nature. The renewal of health and hope begets an impulse to achieve, and the soul lies open to inspirations that will lead to renewed purpose and effort. Thus, at length, we accept the suggestion of the poet, that from the divine influence in nature, the striving of the mountain, the benedicite of the Druid-wood, the tender beauty of June, came the impulse to the heart of Sir Launfal to remember the keeping of his vow. Poetic diction is often obscure and indirect as a means of expressing thought, and the questions below are intended to aid students in the interpretation of the hidden meaning of the poet.

20. **The high tide of the year**. Let each student describe from his own experience and memory the earliest signs of returning spring at the end of winter, and the changes that follow until the time of full bloom.
21. What two things did Lowell personify in the first paragraph of this description? How did he create a personal relation for these personifications? In what is it shown?
22. Add other suitable and beautiful illustrations of the poet's thought from your own observation. Lowell chose the illustrations and figures for this poem from the immediate surroundings of his own home at Elmwood, for a description of which see pages v, vi.

23. Compare this description with Lowell's description of spring in other poems in, —
    a. The things observed and enjoyed most.
    b. In the order in which details are introduced.
    c. In the observer's point of view.

NOTE. — This topic (No. 23) may be omitted if the poems referred to in the discussion, p. 95, are not found in the library.

24. How do living creatures out of doors respond to the influence of a June day?
25. In Lowell's thought, what is the influence to which every living thing in nature responds? Is it in the beauty of the day, or in something else?
26. What passage in the description of June do you like best? Why? What passage do you think most beautiful? Why?
27. What is the keynote, or artistic centre, of this description of June?
28. Show from lines 80–93 what influence the high tide of the year exerts on the human heart.
29. *a.* The last stanza of the prelude is tied to the first in a certain way; show how.
    b. In another way, to the second stanza; explain this relation between the stanzas.
    c. In still another, to the description of June; show in what the connection lies.
30. The last two lines of the prelude introduce a character and tell of something antecedent to the June when the story of Part First begins. Do these lines really belong in the prelude?

NOTE. — If these lines belong in the prelude, they must have some relation to its purpose, and connected steps in the plan must lead the mind to them as a conclusion.

31. In the Prelude to Part First as a whole, what was the main purpose of the poet?
32. Which is longer, the prelude, or the narrative of Part First which it introduces?
33. Is there any part of the prelude for which the main purpose of the introduction is not a sufficient excuse? Would any other reason serve? Express here simply your own feeling and opinion.

PART FIRST

34. What narrative elements for the story have been given in the Prelude?
35. Describe the appearance and character of Sir Launfal from the impression given by Lowell.
36. How much more than he tells in words does the author make you understand? How does he do this?
37. Describe Sir Launfal's life as you imagine it up to the beginning of the story?
38. In the Siege of Summer, lines 119–127,
    a. What is personified?
    b. What was the reason for the siege?
    c. In how many details is the picture of a siege carried out?
    d. For each detail what is the parallel between the literal thing and the meaning in the figure?
    e. Explain the use of the adjectives **churlish, chilly.**
    f. The **pavilions of summer tall, the tents, the murmur at night,** mean what literally?
39. In the story of Sir Launfal's quest, what is Lowell trying to make clear by this beautiful and extended figure?
40. What is the real beginning of the story of Part First?
41. Why did Sir Launfal sleep on the rushes the night before starting on his quest?
42. Find every plot element, or step, before the beginning of the dream.
43. In the beginning of the dream, what was the time of year?

NOTE. — Lowell may have borrowed the suggestion of the dream from the belief in the time of the crusades that a vision was often sent to guide one consecrated to some holy quest.

44. Of what elements in the real story is the first part of the dream made up?
45. In the start what do you learn about Sir Launfal? Why did Lowell choose **surly** as the adjective for clang?
46. What was the real purpose of the knight's quest? What was the vow he had sworn? What particulars are contrasted in the narrative of the start? Why?
47. **Sir Launfal's first adventure.** Make a little plot outline for this incident showing:
    a. The cause, or the beginning.

b. The most important moment.

c. The result and the end of the incident.

48. What is dwelt upon in the description of the leper?

49. In this little plot which is more important, the refusal of the gift, or the reason for it?

NOTE. — This must be shown by the influence of one or the other upon Sir Launfal. The moral force of the reason in itself is not an argument to the point.

50. How far on his quest has the knight gone when Part First closes?

51. At the close of Part First what part of the story remains untold? That is, what more do you care to hear about Sir Launfal's quest?

PRELUDE TO PART SECOND

52. Why did the author choose a winter scene for the Prelude to Part Second?

53. What is the keynote, or artistic centre, for this description?

54. In this prelude what is personified? What is the relation between the persons of the figure?

55. What is the purpose of the first seven lines?

56. In the description of the winter palace of ice the terms and figures are borrowed from architecture:

a. Who is the builder? What material was used?

b. Is the description of the palace from without, or from within? What difference does this make?

NOTE. — In *An Indian-Summer Reverie*, p. 47, Lowell describes the river as protected from the onslaught of winter in another way; the material used, and the agent that builds, the frost, are the same, but the point of view of the description and the details are different. The student may compare.

57. In the description of the hall within the castle Lowell uses many figures of speech; one follows another very closely and sometimes the means of transition is no more than some habitual association in the mind.

What is the reason that the mind passes easily from the personification of Christmas to the figure in the next two

NOTE. — Definitions with illustrations will be found in the Century and unabridged dictionaries.

lines? Is **sprouting** a good adjective here? Show reasons for your opinion from the picture in your mind, etc.

58. In lines 215–224, how many times does the poet change his comparison, and thus suggest a new picture in the mind?

59. Which of these comparisons belong to the picture of the great fireplace and the blazing yule log?

60. For each of the following explain —

a. What two things the poet compares.

b. In what the similarity lies.

c. Whether differences come to your mind in spite of yourself as you read? The numbers refer to the lines of the poem.

215. **deep gulf.**
216. **roaring tide.**
217. **pennons droop.**
219. **a locust shrills.**
220. **hunted to death.**
220. **galleries blind.**
221. **troops of sparks.**
223. **soot-forest.**

61. In the figure which the line **Like herds of startled deer** completes, carry out two descriptions, one of deer fleeing from the scent of the hunter on the wind, the other of the picture in the fireplace which it parallels, and point out every similarity you can find, and also anything in which the two pictures are very dissimilar.

62. There is one very unpleasant figure in this stanza; what is it? Why is it poor? Why did Lowell use it?

63. In the Prelude to Part Second, Lowell attempted to write a parallel to the Prelude to Part First in plan, arrangement, and relation to the story that follows, and at the same time to contrast the two preludes sharply in the details described and in the hidden meaning. Make in brief outline a parallel showing for each prelude, —

a. Time of year.

b. Place of scene.

c. Description of scene without the castle.

d. Description of castle within.

e. The meaning of the description in relation to the story.

64. In the first part of the narrative the castle was gloomy and churlish. Why this change in the description of it? Has there been any change in its use? Is this change consistent with the allegorical meaning of the poem?

Prove by comparison and contrast; the two descriptions of

Sir Launfal, the first and the second incident of the leper, furnish material.

65. Does the description of winter, as you read, seem to belong in Sir Launfal's dream, or out of it? Which did Lowell intend?
66. Is there any hint in the descriptions of the Prelude to Part Second that they illustrate some special thought or meaning?
67. Do the descriptions, figures, etc., of the second prelude guide the reader to any starting point for the narrative of Part Second?
68. What is the purpose of this prelude?

PART SECOND

69. What is omitted between Part First and Part Second (*a*) in time; (*b*) in incidents; (*c*) in the experience of the knight; (*d*) in change of character.
70. Are any narrative elements essential to the story given in the Prelude to Part Second?
71. In what is the beginning of the story, or plot, of Part Second?
72. Contrast the opening scene with the first adventure of the knight in Part First in, (*a*) time; (*b*) place; (*c*) description of Sir Launfal; (*d*) plot element, or action.
73. **Sir Launfal mused as he sat.**
    a. What pictures are given?
    b. Why are these pictures introduced here just before the beggar addresses the knight?
74. **The incident of the leper.**
    Compare this incident with the former one in
    a. The description of the leper.
    b. The description and situation of Sir Launfal.
    c. The gift; the reason for giving.
    d. The most important moment of the incident.
    e. The result and the conclusion.
75. How do you explain the difference in the outcome of these two incidents?
76. In the dream, in what was the beginning?
77. What is the most important moment, or climax of the dream?

78. What is the result or conclusion?
79. If the dream were not a dream but a story, could you find a title for it that would give a hint of its real meaning? **The waking of Sir Launfal.**
80. How long a time had passed since the story began?
81. How long a time did the dream seem to cover?
82. What was the result of the dream in Sir Launfal's life?
83. In the whole story, where do you find the climax?
84. In what is the end of the story?
85. What is meant by **The Summer's long siege at last is o'er**?
86. Show by comparison whether Lowell continues and carries out the figure used in Part First here, or whether this line is no more than an allusion to carry the mind back to the conditions of an earlier time in the story.
87. Do you think of Sir Launfal at the end as an old man or as a young one? Which did Lowell intend? Support your opinion from the poem.

GENERAL TOPICS

I. What is the theme or real purpose of the poem, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*?

II. What ethical truth, or lesson, did Lowell intend to embody clearly and effectively in this poem?

III. In Part Second, what do you find that corresponds to and illustrates exactly the line in the Prelude to Part First, **We Sinais climb and know it not**?

IV. Lowell invented his plot. What did he borrow from old traditions and stories? Did he change the meaning of anything that he borrowed?

V. If Lowell thought of the Quest, and the Holy Grail as allegorical symbols which he might use to convey a spiritual meaning, explain for what each part stood in his mind at the time of the writing of the poem.

a. The castle in the North Countree.
b. The knight.
c. The object of the quest.
d. The leper.
e. The finding of the Grail.

VI. A poem is great when the special meaning in the mind of

the author at the time of its composition includes also some wider truth or meaning which will always interpret common human experience, and inspire new love of beauty and of noble conduct. In this wider meaning, for what does the knight stand? The castle? The siege of summer?

VII. What definition of the true meaning, in all time, of the Grail is given?

VIII. What is the quest? What is the significance of the finding of the Grail?

IX. What special belief of Lowell's do you find in this poem?

X. What evidence or illustration do you find of the characteristics of a poet as different from a philanthropist, or a writer of prose?

XI. Which passage in this poem do you think noblest? Why?

XII. Which passage do you like best? Why?

XIII. Which passage do you think most full of poetic beauty and meaning? Why?

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